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LETTERS TO DOLLY.

LOVE AND A COTTAGE.

THE GOD IN THE GARDEN.

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THE SMITHS OF SURBITON.

OUR JOHN, M.P.

THE OLD GAME.

THE WHIP HAND.

THE BACHELOR GIRLS.

THE JESTER'S WINDOW.

THE GIRL WHO COULDN'T LIE.

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MISS CHARITY

A TALE FROM MY HEART

BY

KEBLE HOWARD, pseud.

It was Saturday saying to Sunday,
'The village is still and asleep,
By the clock it is twelve, so for one day
Rouse up, and your own watches keep,
I am tired of my trouble and labour,
I must rest for a week from my care:
Your hour is striking, my neighbour.'
Quoth Sunday, 'My friend, I am here.'

HENRI MURGER.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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DEDICATORY

I desire to dedicate this story to my Father, as a slight memento of thirty-three years' patient, loving service in a poor parish

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BOOK I

ALL ON A DAY IN JUNE

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CHAPTER I

A QUEER, frightened little crowd of women and children stood in the roadway before the cottage of Fred Palins.

'They oughtn't never to let 'im out,' said Mrs. Bonehill. 'What's the good? 'E's sure to be back in gaol again afore the month's out! If I 'ad my way with truck like that——'

'It's the drink as does it,' said Mrs. Coppage. 'Fred's not 'alf a bad sort when 'e's sober, but a drop too much drink and 'e must up with 'is fists and begin thumpin' somebody. In my opinion, they didn't ought to serve 'im, not at the "Arms" nor yet anywhere else.'

'You can't stop a man from drinkin' by refusin' ter serve 'im,' said Mrs. Bonehill, and the other women shook their heads in mournful agreement. Mrs. Bonehill, feeling that she had scored a social success, gave her third daughter, Gracie, a smart cuff on the side of the head, and followed up this rally in the cause of respectability by pinching and polishing the baby's nose with her apron.

'Poor little Triss!' said a girl of sixteen. 'When they passed our place, she was as white as a sheet.'

'And no wonder!' said Mrs. Coppage. 'I saw 'ow it was with Fred the very moment 'e come out of the "Arms." But I never thought 'e'd be mad

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enough to go to the school and fetch Triss out like that! Just fancy! I don't suppose——'

'Listen!' said the girl, suddenly.

Silence fell on the group. They stared hard at the cottage, as though expecting it to rise a little way in the air, turn twice round, and settle down again.

'Did yer 'ear anything?' whispered Mrs. Bonehill.

'I thought I 'eard Triss calling out!'

'I shouldn't wonder,' said Crazy Jim, scraping a neat little hole in the roadway with his boot, 'if 'e was murderin' 'er.'

The women shuddered.

'Shut yer mouth!' said Mrs. Coppage, sharply. 'Why don't yer be off and fetch Tom King, seein' as yer no good yerself?'

Tom King was the local constable. His duties brought him to the tiny village of Littleworth once each day. He was the only man in the neighbourhood, with the exception of John Cogbill, who could tackle Fred Palins single-handed, and even Tom did not relish the job when Fred was fighting drunk.

'Not me,' said Crazy Jim, with a cunning grin. 'Fred 'ud knock my head off when 'e got out.'

'I've a very good mind to go and tap at the door meself,' said Mrs. Coppage.

'Don't you be a fool,' Mrs. Bonehill advised. 'You couldn't do no good, and maybe get a black eye or summat o' that for yer pains.'

They were still chatting in this helpless, irresolute, desultory way when there appeared, round the bend of the road further from the village, a young woman of indeterminate age and station. By her dress, which was severely simple and

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obviously home-made, you might have judged her to be the daughter of a small tenant-farmer. The quiet dignity with which she bore her little body, however, indicated gentle birth. Again, the clearness of her skin, and the brightness of her soft brown eyes, might have led you, at the first glance, to suppose that she was eighteen or twenty years of age. If you took the liberty, though, of looking into her very frank and charming face, you would have observed a few signs that time traces even about the eyes of those whose days are placid and whose sleep is unbroken.

'Ere's Miss Charity!' cried Gracie Bonehill, and ran to meet her.

The women moved slowly in the same direction. They could not have told you precisely why they did so. It was just a common impulse, arising naturally from the love and trust that every living thing in the village had for this quiet, sweet little woman in the odd, cheap clothes.

Charity stooped and put out her arms to break the force of the child's rush.

'Why, Gracie,' she said, noting at once the tear-stains on the little face, 'surely you've never been crying on such a lovely afternoon?'

'Mother 'it me,' said Gracie.

'Your mother hit you? Then I'm afraid you must have been doing something naughty.'

'No, I never,' said Gracie, stoutly.

'Well, never mind. Don't cry any more. What's all the excitement about?'

'It's that there good-for-nothing Fred Palins,' said Gracie's mother, who had now drawn within earshot. ''E on'y come out of prison this morning,

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Miss Charity, and 'e got blazin' drunk at the "King's Arms," and wanted to know where Triss was. And when they told 'im——'

Mrs. Bonehill's volubility was a little too much for Mrs. Coppage's patience.

'Yer see, Miss Charity,' she broke in, eagerly, 'Triss was at school, and so Fred must needs force 'is way in and fetch the child out.'

'Do you mean to say that he went into the school and dragged Triss out by main force?'

'Yes,' said several voices.

'An' poor Miss Minto,' went on Mrs. Bonehill, anticipating Mrs. Coppage by the fraction of a second, 'was nat'rally scared out of 'er seven senses, and they 'ad to lay 'er down on the sofa and put wet towels on her, and that's 'ow it is all the children are 'ere instead o' bein' in school!'

'And what became of Fred Palins and Triss?'

'Why, 'e took 'er along 'ome with 'im, and they 're in the cottage now. And that's why we followed, not knowin' what 'e mightn't do to 'er, pore little thing, 'e 's that mad drunk!'

'Oh, I 'm sure he wouldn't harm her,' said Charity. 'He 's very fond of her at heart. And she 's all he has, you know, since he lost his wife.'

'Ay,' said Mrs. Coppage, brushing away a bead of perspiration with the back of her hand. 'It 's the death of 'is wife as makes 'im take more than 's good for 'im.'

'Not it!' said Mrs. Bonehill, always a stickler for facts. ''E used ter drink just the same when she was alive, pore thing. Many 's the time she 's told me——'

'Not before the little ones,' said Charity, gently.

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She moved towards the cottage, and raised the latch of the gate at the bottom of the garden-path.

'For mercy's sake,' cried the women, 'don't go in there, Miss Charity!'

''E's not safe!' declared Mrs. Coppage. 'Really, Miss Charity, if I'd thought 'e was safe, I'd 'ave gone myself!'

'Triss may be wanting me,' said Charity.

She opened the gate, passed through, closed it behind her, and walked up the narrow tiled pathway to the door of the cottage. The women and children, breathless, watched her in silence. Before she could knock at the door, it was flung open with a crash, and Fred Palins barred the entrance.

He was a shortish, thickly-built man of middle age. He had flung aside both coat and waistcoat, and his shirt was open at the neck. Despite his three months' enforced abstinence, his skin was disfigured with the traces of his past excesses, and the new liquor that he had taken since leaving the gaol had driven the blood to his eyes. His hair had been cropped to the roots so often that it seemed at last to have abandoned the unequal struggle. The premature bald patches amused the prison barber, who hinted, merrily enough, that the scythe of Time was more effective than his scissors. But these same bald patches did not improve Mr. Palins's appearance. In fact, to be quite candid, he was not a pleasant person to look upon.

For all that, Charity looked upon him and was not afraid. From the moment when human consciousness first stirred in her baby frame, until the present day, Charity had never known the

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meaning of fear. Of what, she would have asked you, without the smallest suggestion of priggishness, had she to be afraid? Of pain? But physical pain always passed. Of disfigurement? She knew that none loved her for her beauty, since she was not beautiful. Of death? But death was the gateway through which she must pass to her inheritance. Her mother had passed through that gateway, and Charity remembered well the sweet peacefulness of that last sinking to sleep. The farewell touch of those dear, feeble fingers had robbed the brief journey of all terror.

Fred Palins, recognising his visitor, bit back an ugly word—perhaps, even, an uglier deed.

'Wha' d'yer want?' he demanded.

'Good afternoon,' said Charity. 'I've come to see Triss.'

She took a step forward, and the man, ruled by instinct, fell back and let her pass. Then he slammed the door.

'My word,' said Mrs. Coppage, 'if she hasn't gone in!'

'She's got more pluck than all the lot of us put together,' said the girl of sixteen.

'Silliness—that's what I call it,' remarked Mrs. Bonehill.

'I shouldn't wonder if 'e was ter cop 'er one,' said Crazy Jim, cheerfully.

Charity found Triss huddled up on a hard chair in the almost bare kitchen. Her handkerchief was sopped with tears. 'Mother, oh, mother, dear,' she was moaning, 'why don't you come back? I do want you so, mother, dearest! Oh, I do want you so!'

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'Triss,' said Charity, softly.

The child raised her head. The next moment, she was safe in the arms of this faithful friend. Her thin little frame was trembling with the agony of her grief. Charity held her tightly, smoothing the tumbled hair with gentle fingers.

The man, leaning against the kitchen wall, watched the pair with an ugly sneer on his face.

'That's the way,' he said. 'Turn the kid agin me! She may as well be the same as all the rest on 'em. Tell her I'm a drunkard and a gaol-bird! Go on! I don't care! I don't care a——'

Charity raised her head and looked him steadily in the eyes.

'Will you go into the other room?' she asked.

'No, I won't! It's my place, and I'll do as I please in it, and no bloomin' parson's daughter's goin' t' interfere in my affairs, nor yet the parson 'imself, neither!'

'Will you go into the other room?' repeated Charity.

And Fred Palins, for all his bluster, lurched, at last, out of the kitchen.

The change that Charity wrought in the appearance and mood of that child in something under ten minutes was little short of miraculous. She began by splashing her face with cold water to get rid of the tear-stains, and when some of the water went into Triss's eyes and mouth and made her laugh, Charity, you may be sure, found some excuse for repeating the dose, so that Fred Palins, hanging over the rusty grate in the parlour and brooding on the injustice of the world at large, was suddenly aware of such joyous sounds as had

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not been heard in that little cottage for many dreary months.

Then Charity sent Triss dashing upstairs for a brush, a comb, and a clean pinafore. The pinafore had a bad tear in the middle of it, but Charity soon put that as right as possible with needle and thread. Triss had pretty, fair hair, and it paid for brushing and combing. Charity was not afraid of making the child vain. She knew that pride in their personal appearance kept the majority of girls and young women interested and alert, and so she told Triss what lovely hair she had, and made her promise faithfully to brush it out night and morning, and tie it back with the daintiest little bit of ribbon she could find. It would have done you good to see Triss, the hopeless and woe-begone, twisting this way and that to catch the effect of the afternoon sunlight on her tawny mane.

'And now,' said Charity, 'I want you to do something specially for me. Will you, Triss?'

'I'd do anything for you, Miss Charity.' And Triss meant it.

'Well, this is not a very difficult thing. I want you to go into the next room, and put your arms round your father's neck, and kiss him. Will you do that for me, Triss?'

The child's face fell. 'He always smells so nasty when he's been drinking,' she said.

'I know, dear, but you must forget about that for this once. Your father is very unhappy, and he thinks we are all against him, and I want him to know that there's somebody who loves him, and trusts him, and always expects him to do the best

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he can, in spite of everything. Your mother used to kiss him, didn't she?'

'Yes. Even when he beat her she kissed him afterwards. But I hated him. I'd have killed him if I could.'

'Hush, Triss, hush! I don't like to hear you talk like that. Some day, perhaps, you will be led into doing something wicked yourself, and then what do you suppose would happen if every one said they hated you, and refused to love you any more? Why, you would probably do something even more wicked, and so you would go on, and on, and on, until you had gone too far to turn back. And all because nobody would love you in time.'

Without another word, the child slipped off Charity's knee and went into the parlour. Elbows on knees and chin in hands, the man was still hanging over the desolate, untidy hearth.

For one moment, Triss, fearing a blow in exchange for her caress, hesitated. Then, with little heart beating very fast, she stole alongside her father and put her arms about his neck.

Astonished beyond measure, Fred Palins, drunkard, wife-beater, and gaol-bird, had the grace to remain motionless.

'From mother,' whispered Triss. And then she stole back to the kitchen.

Surely some angel gave her those two words! As the summer rain sinks into the parched earth, so that simple phrase sank into the heart of this forlorn man, raw with misery, starved for love. His head dropped lower in his hands, and his thick shoulders shook.

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CHAPTER II

THE women and children still waited in the roadway. Presently, as they gossiped and wondered with an appetite for melodrama that seemed, and probably was, insatiable, they heard the sound of a trotting horse.

'Young Mr. Cogbill be a-coming,' said Crazy Jim.

Mrs. Coppage turned on him with an eager inquiry. ''Ow d'you know it's young Mr. Cogbill?'

'If it ain't,' said Crazy Jim, with a wise grin, 'somebody must 'ave stole 'is mare.'

Sure enough, round the corner from the village came John Cogbill. You will remember that he shared with Tom King, the constable, the reputation of being able to tackle Fred Palins single-handed. As a matter of fact, John Cogbill could probably have managed the two together. He was a big, broad-shouldered yeoman, with a clear eye and healthy complexion that told of simple, nourishing fare, hard work, and healthy hours from childhood onwards. His laugh was a tonic; he never frowned—save when writing a letter or making a mental calculation; and the grip of his hand told you more about the history of England in ten seconds than any history book could have taught you in as many months.

'My word!' said Mrs. Coppage; and her neigh-

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bours understood the significance of the ejaculation. For little Miss Charity, properly speaking, belonged to John Cogbill. No formal troth had been plighted, so far as any one knew, but for twelve years or so it had been well known in Littleworth that John and Charity would be man and wife whensoever it should please old Mr. and Mrs. Cogbill to hand over Nutlands Farm to their only son. It was twelve years now since Charity's eldest sister had gone to South Africa to be married, and had settled down there for good and all. It was ten years since Charity's second sister had met and married a doctor at Bournemouth. And all this time Charity had lived at Littleworth Vicarage with her widowed father, fulfilled the humble duties that fell to her lot, shared John's prayer-book in church—with an aching heart but a smiling face, she had yielded up the harmonium to Miss Minto, the schoolmistress, who had had lessons in Warwick and could almost read a strange hymn at sight—and waited until it should please him to ask her hand in matrimony. Both felt, perhaps, that there was no great hurry. They had always, of course, been fond of each other, but John had the farm to attend to, and Charity her father, and so the years slipped by in quiet contentment.

'What's the matter?' asked John, reining in his horse.

Mrs. Bonehill snapped at the question as quickly as a dog at a biscuit.

'Oh, if you please, sir, it's that there good-for-nothing Fred Palins again. 'E come out of prison this morning, you know, sir, and no sooner did he

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arrive in the village from Warwick than he must go into the "Arms" and make a beast of 'imself. And then 'e fetched Triss out of school and frightened poor Miss Minto into 'ysterics, and now Miss Charity 's gone in there all by 'erself to see as no 'arm don't come to Triss!'

'Eh?' said John.

'I'd 'ave gone in meself,' Mrs. Coppage declared, hastily, 'on'y they wouldn't let me. "Don't you do nothing of the sort," says Mrs. Bonehill, or else, you may be sure, Mr. Cogbill, as I should 'ave——'

'Well, there!' exclaimed Mrs. Bonehill, appealing for justice to her neighbours with wide eyes and open palms extended. 'I never said nothing of the sort, Mrs. Coppage, an' 'ow you can tell——'

'Certingly you did!' cried Mrs. Coppage, angrily. 'I said as I 'ad a good mind ter go an' tap at the door, an' I was just movin' off——'

'You never so much as stirred a foot!' declared Mrs. Bonehill, passionately. 'Did she, Gracie? You was 'ere!'

'All right, all right,' said John. 'I want to know what you said about Miss Charity, Mrs. Bonehill.'

'She 's in the cottage,' cried the women in chorus, and Crazy Jim added, in a philosophic sing-song, ''E must 'ave copped 'er one by this time.'

John swung off his horse, threw the bridle to Crazy Jim, and walked briskly up the little pathway. Fred Palins was suddenly aware of somebody raising the latch of his front-door.

Hastily dashing the tell-tale tears from his eyes, he rubbed a sleeve across his face and then sat back in his chair to await the visitor. No sooner was the doorway filled with John's great figure,

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however, than Fred hoisted himself out of his chair and lurched unsteadily towards the intruder.

'Wha' d'you want 'ere?' he shouted. 'There's no call for you to come pryin' about 'ere. Get out!'

At the sound of his angry voice, Charity came in quickly from the kitchen, followed by Triss.

'You'd better stand out of my way,' said John, quietly.

'What's the matter?' asked Charity. 'What do you want, John?'

''E wants to push 'is way into other folk's 'ouses —that's what 'e wants,' stormed Fred. 'I ain't nothin' ter do with you, John Cogbill! You turned me off yer farm! Very well! I never arst ter be took back, did I? I never come sneakin' round fer jobs like some o' the skunks, did I? Very well, then! Get outside o' my 'ouse or I'll——'

He advanced threateningly, with clenched fist. John drew himself up, prepared to receive the attack. But Charity, with a deft movement, slipped her little figure between the two men.

'Mr. Palins,' she said, 'I'm ashamed of you. Mr. Cogbill, as you know very well, is a friend of mine, and he has simply called to escort me home.'

'Then what's 'e want ter come in to my 'ouse without so much as by your leave?' demanded Fred.

'I knocked three times and could get no answer.'

'That's a lie, John Cogbill! I was sittin' in 'ere meself the 'ole bloomin' time, and——'

'It really isn't worth discussing,' said Charity. 'If you'll go outside, John, I'll be with you in two minutes.'

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'Right,' said John, and he went out like some great obedient animal.

'An' good riddance!' Fred called after him.

Triss slid up to Charity, and put her arm round the elder girl's waist. Charity did not speak, but the reproachful look in her eyes hurt the man who knew her for a friend.

'Well?' he said sulkily.

'Well?' said Charity.

'What right 's 'e got to come lordin' it over me?'

'I've told you why Mr. Cogbill came.'

'Why didn't 'e knock at the door, then, same as any one else? Just because 'e 's a genelman——'

'Mr. Cogbill told you that he knocked three times and could get no answer. He never lies, Mr. Palins.'

'Well! No more don't I!'

No reply.

'Do *I* lie, eh? Is that it?'

'I'm not judging you.' She turned to Triss. 'Have you any tea in the house, dear?'

Triss shook her head.

'Tea?' laughed Fred. 'No, there 's no tea in the 'ouse, nor yet any bread. There ain't nothing, and not likely ter be from what I can see of it.'

He returned to his chair, and sank into it with a thud.

'Wait a moment,' whispered Charity, disengaging herself from the child's embrace.

She went out of the cottage. John was pacing slowly up and down the little tiled path. Charity beckoned him to her side.

'I want you to give me half-a-crown,' she said.

The coin was produced. 'He 'll only drink it, you know,' said John.

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'I don't think so.'

She re-entered the cottage. 'Mr. Palins,' she said, 'here is some money for tea, and bread, and bacon. May I send Triss to the shop?'

''Oo's money?' demanded Fred.

'Mr. Cogbill's.'

'Then you can take it back to 'im. I don't want none of 'is dirty money, an' you can tell 'im so.'

'And what about Triss? Can't you think of her for a moment? Is she to go without food because you think it rather fine to despise Mr. Cogbill's loan?'

'Don't you worry about that. Triss'll get 'er supper right enough. It won't be the first time as I 've found one for 'er.'

'You mean stolen one, don't you?'

'Poachin' ain't stealin'. Everybody knows the difference save the gentlefolk, and they take precious good care to keep the best of everything to themselves. You can do what yer like with that there money, but I won't touch it, an' no more shan't Triss! An' that's flat!'

'Very well. I'll give it back to Mr. Cogbill. But I shall put my own money in place of it.'

Fred Palins raised his cropped head and stared at her. He knew well enough, as everybody knew in Littleworth and the neighbouring villages, that Charity Couchman and her father had to make a very little go a very long way.

'Yer own money?'

'Yes.'

'Nor I won't take that, neither.'

'Because you think I can't afford it?'

No reply.

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'My father and I are poor,' said Charity. 'But we are not so poor that we cannot afford to feed a little girl whose father will not work to keep her from starvation.'

'That's a lie! 'Oo said I wouldn't work? I can't get no work, same as a lot more.'

'If I can get you work, will you take it?'

'There's nobody 'oo'll give me none. They're all agen me. I know it well enough.'

'If I can get Mr. Cogbill to give you work, will you take it?'

'Mr. Cogbill? 'E's turned me off three times. Likely as 'e'll give me another chance!'

'If I can get him to give you work, will you take it—for Triss's sake?'

The man looked at Charity. Then his eyes wandered to Triss. Perhaps he remembered the two words. At any rate, he turned away again and dropped his head into his hands.

'Yes,' he said.

Once more Charity talked with John Cogbill on the pathway. The village women, as you may suppose, were all agog to know the exact meaning of these brief consultations. They had noted, with some resentment, the giving of the first coin.

'Looks as though Fred's stickin' out fer a bit more,' said Mrs. Coppage.

'Ay, the cunning bit! An' any one as kep' themselves respectable might die in their beds and nobody take much notice. It's allus the way!'

'If I died in my bed,' said Crazy Jim, 'I shud get all stiff and then me feet 'ud stick out at the bottom. Woa, mare!'

To Mrs. Bonehill's relief, John Cogbill produced

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no further money. But the look of gratitude that Charity gave him did not escape the sharp eyes of the gossips.

'She 's wonderful fond of 'im,' said Mrs. Coppage, with something like a sigh. It was the custom in Littleworth to sigh over the single state of Miss Charity, and to speak very hardly of the tenacious qualities of old Mr. and Mrs. Cogbill.

'I have spoken to Mr. Cogbill,' said Charity, delighted, for more than one reason, perhaps, at the success of her mission, 'and he has consented to take you on again, Mr. Palins, at the former rate of wages. This half-crown is to be in advance of next Saturday's money. May I send Triss to the shop?'

Fred nodded. As for Triss, she looked up and whispered, 'I love you better than anybody in the world, Miss Charity.'

And then, for very shyness, she pressed her burning face against a sleeve of the funny little home-made blouse.

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CHAPTER III

JOHN COGBILL told Crazy Jim to lead his horse round to Nutlands. He wanted to walk across the fields with Charity.

They passed through the little wooden kissing-gate at the bend of the road, and strolled along beneath the shelter of the high hedge. From the adjoining meadow came the whirr of a mowing-machine, and the occasional shout from the driver as he admonished his horses. The scent of the newly-mown, browning grass filled the lazy afternoon air.

Presently they came to a stile. John climbed it first, swinging one great leg after the other. Then he turned, holding out two enormous, rough, burnt, kindly hands.

'I think I could manage better by myself,' said Charity.

'If you say much more,' said John, 'I shall lift you over.'

Charity laughed, accepted the assistance offered, and leapt lightly to the ground.

'Splendid!' cried John, highly satisfied with himself for his boldness.

This was a field of young corn, and the pathway was very narrow. Charity walked first, of course, and John strode along behind. Turning

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suddenly to make some remark, she caught him smiling.

'What are you laughing at?' she demanded. For Charity, the tone was almost imperious.

'Was I laughing?' And then he 'guffawed,' if you know what that means.

'There you go again! I won't be laughed at, Mr. Cogbill! D'you understand me?'

'I was thinking,' explained John, roaring with laughter, 'of a little bit of a thing like you downing Fred Palins. Well, upon my word! Takes the cake that does!'

'I didn't know I had "downed" him, as you call it. I was thinking only about poor little Triss. D'you know that he actually forced his way into the school and dragged her out?'

'That's all very well,' said John, ignoring the question. 'But what about poor little Charity, supposing that he'd taken it into his head to strike you?'

'Fred wouldn't do that,' said Charity, confidently.

'You never know what a man may do when he's drunk, especially a chap like Fred Palins. You ought not to take such risks. . . . I don't like it.'

The note of authority in his voice brought to Charity such a tumult of sensations that she could not possibly reply. He had spoken as though she already belonged to him—as though he had a right to order her goings. It was the first time, in all these long years, that she had detected such a tone. She was glad that she had her back to him, for she knew well enough that her face

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was crimson. Simple, modest little Charity! A coquette would have demanded, on the instant, what it had to do with him where she went and what risks she ran. A coquette would have feigned annoyance, and brought the great fellow, all penitence and humility, to her feet in something under two minutes. A coquette would have stormed that she might shine, threatened that she might relent, blamed that she might forgive, reproached that she might smile sweetly through tears of indignation.

And Charity? Charity walked on steadily, and strove to calm herself before they reached the little gate that led from the cornfield into the lane. Of course, it meant nothing. He was a very old friend, and he would naturally feel that he had the right to reprove her for doing something that seemed to him rash and foolish. Was it likely that this particular afternoon, one among so many that they had passed together, should bring about any change in their relations? Certainly not! Silly little Charity! At your age, my dear, you really ought to have more sense! Suppose he caught you with that ridiculous blush on your face—what in the world would he think? And, at the very idea of such a dire catastrophe, Charity blushed again.

The lane was a deep one, considerably below the level of the cornfield, and the rough wooden steps that some dead and gone hand had provided were worn, and rickety, and dangerous. At any rate, John Cogbill evidently considered them dangerous, for he insisted that Charity should descend backwards, and that he should hold both her hands as she did so. It was not a bit of use for Charity to protest that she ran up and down them a dozen

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times a day, and that, in any case, the handrail afforded firmer support than John's hands. The young giant was in a masterful mood this afternoon, a mood that astonished Charity as much as, secretly, it delighted her. She yielded at last, therefore, and you can imagine the fun she made of poor John when her foot slipped on the bottom step and he came within an ace of letting her tumble into the lane after all.

It was deliciously cool in the lane. First of all you noticed the high clay banks, with thick hedges on the top of those, and arching elms behind the hedges. A tiny stream ran down one side, and when John and Charity stood still for a moment without speaking, they could hear it talking to itself as busily as a cricket. Few people passed this way, so that there was grass and moss underfoot; and a few little ferns, bolder than their companions, had ventured to stray from the maternal bank and establish a business of their own in perilous proximity to the wheels of the baker's and butcher's carts. This lane led right to the Vicarage, and separated it from Nutlands Farm, which stood almost exactly opposite.

If John Cogbill's behaviour had been strange in the cornfield, it was altogether unaccountable when the couple gained the friendly shelter of the lane. He stopped dead, looked up the lane, looked down the lane, looked at the moss underfoot, looked through the interlacing branches of the trees at the blue sky beyond, looked at his boots, looked at a cow who was looking at him over a hedge, looked everywhere, in short, that a man in such a situation could look, and then, at last, as

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though he had suddenly remembered that he was not quite alone, looked at Charity.

Whereupon, since you must know, Charity looked at the moss underfoot, and looked up the lane and down the lane, and looked at the sky, and the stream, and the cow, and at last, from beneath long brown lashes that were not quite steady, looked at John. Then she smiled, and John smiled, and they both laughed, and Charity moved gently in the direction of the Vicarage, and John Cogbill, congratulating himself on the rapid advances he was making in the subtle and difficult art of courting, paced alongside.

A few moments later, John stopped again. Charity, perforce, waited for him, and even looked back over her shoulder. Her knees began to tremble a little. She felt that the air was heavy with Fate.

'I say,' said John, moving up to her and fixing a serious gaze on the tip of one of her ears.

'Yes,' said Charity.

What in the world did this mean? What *could* it mean? The Vicarage was just round the corner; should she make a blind dash for the drive-gate?

'I say,' repeated John, 'would you——?'

And here, at the very point, of course, where he should have gone on, he paused and looked at the sky. The cow, which had followed them from her side of the hedge, stared very solemnly at the couple. She was a motherly creature, and would willingly have helped them out of their difficulties had she been able.

'Yes?' said Charity, with the merest suggestion of encouragement in her gentle voice.

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'Would you——?' said John, and stopped again. But he added suddenly, before Charity could reply, 'That is to say, if you've nothing better to do.'

Charity seemed bewildered, as indeed she was.

'I don't think I——'

'I was only going to say,' explained John, not, perhaps, very truthfully, 'that if you would come in and have a cup of tea, the old folks would be very glad to make you welcome.'

'Oh!' said Charity.

There was a world of meaning in that 'Oh!' had John been able to interpret it aright. It meant, 'Oh! And so that's all, is it? And here have I been frightening myself to death over an invitation to tea! Why in the world did you make such a fuss about it, I wonder? Did you, when you began, mean nothing more than an invitation to tea, John Cogbill? But have I not been dropping in to tea with the old folks any time these last I-don't-know-quite-how-many years? I can't help thinking that you had something else in your mind, my dear John! But I'm very glad, of course, that you didn't say it, whatever it may have been. Yes, very glad and relieved indeed, although Mrs. Lilley *does* say foolish things whenever she gets an opportunity for gossip! Just as though I wanted to——' But at this point she pulled her thoughts up with a sharp jerk, and said, as quietly and evenly as usual, 'Thank you very much, John. I will come with pleasure.'

Old Mr. Cogbill was sitting in the porch, staring with dim, watery eyes across the fields that he had tilled and tended for so many years. He knew that people thought it selfish of him to cling to

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Nutlands when he was long past taking the leading part in the management of the farm. But he knew, too, that when he left the house in which he had been born and brought up, in which he had been punished by his father and kissed by his mother, in which he had closed their eyes for the last, long sleep, to which he had brought his bride rather better than fifty years ago, in which his son had been born, of which he knew every stick and stone, every twist and turn—he knew that when he left this house for the little one that stood over against Yew Barn, he would be rounding the last bend of the long, long avenue.

All these things the old man thought of as he sat in the porch that summer afternoon, and listened to the melody of the machines, and stared out across the meadows.

He looked up as the young couple turned in at the gate. As he recognised Charity, he acknowledged her presence with a grunt. There was significance in that grunt.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Cogbill,' said Charity, and took the seat opposite to him, whilst John went to warn his mother that she would have company to tea. In Littleworth, when any one came to tea, even a next-door neighbour, it meant a certain bustle, and preparation, and a clean white cloth, and the best tea-service, and a new pot of honey, and a cake, and hurried ablutions on the part of the maid, and some puffing on the part of the mistress, and grand airs, and very thoughtful and proper inquiries as to the health of one's visitor and one's visitor's relations.

''Noon,' replied Mr. Cogbill. He fixed Charity

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with the watery eyes. 'E ain't bin long, then,' said Mr. Cogbill.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I say, 'e ain't bin long, then.'

'I'm afraid I don't quite understand.'

'I say,' repeated the old man, raising his voice and speaking somewhat testily, 'e ain't bin long! The lad, I mean. 'E's soon told yer!'

'Mister John, do you mean?'

'Ay! 'Oo else shud I mean? I say, 'e ain't bin long tellin' yer!'

'But he hasn't told me anything. Is there some news?'

'Noos? Ay, there's noos right enough. I thought mebbe 'e'd told yer. I thought 'e might 'ave told yer.'

He stared across the fields again, mumbling to himself. Charity, half guessing the nature of the news, felt distinctly uncomfortable. She wished, now, that she had not come to tea. It was so difficult to know where the rights of the old left off and the rights of the young began.

The old man thrust a shaky hand into a side-pocket and drew out a wooden snuff-box. It fastened with a snap, and his fingers were so feeble, and shook so persistently, that he could not open it.

'Let me do it,' said Charity.

The lid came open with a jerk, and some of the snuff jumped into her face and made her sneeze violently. But the old man did not laugh.

'Ay,' he said, rubbing his nostril with a horny thumb, 'there's noos right enough.'

A few minutes later, to Charity's intense relief,

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Mrs. Cogbill joined them, and Annie, the general servant, followed with a small wooden table.

'Well, this is a pleasant surprise,' said Mrs. Cogbill, smiling so brightly that she looked fully ten years younger than her husband, although, as a matter of fact, the old couple were almost precisely the same age. 'I must say I do like any one to drop in just casual. (That table'll never stand there, Annie. Don't you see it's balancing itself on three legs? It'll be tumbling over and shooting your master's tea into his lap, if you don't mind. Here, leave it to me and run along and bring the tea before it's all stewed, there's a good girl.) Yes, it's so nice and neighbourly. And how's yer Pa? As strong and hearty as ever, I suppose? What a wonderful old gentleman, to be sure! Only this morning, when I just walked a few yards down the lane to find a bit o' green stuff for the rabbits, I see him workin' away at that there tennis-lawn, wheeling barrer-loads of earth and stuff as though he'd been bred and born a day labourer instead of a gentleman and a scholar. (That's right, Annie. Now the tea-cakes, and don't tread your shoe down at the heel, my girl, or it'll be comin' off when you don't expect it, one o' these fine days, and we shall have you going about with a broken nose, and what not.) Yes, it's a curious 'obby, that of yer Pa's, Charity, but I daresay it keeps 'is liver in good workin' order. Get yerself a chair, John, my lad, or the tea-cakes'll be that cold they'll be like lumps o' lead in yer stomach!'

'Nobody makes such delicious tea-cakes as you do,' said Charity.

'Well,' replied Mrs. Cogbill, rising to remove a

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small piece of butter from her husband's chin, 'I can't pretend that my 'and's as light as it was, but I must admit that makin' tea-cakes, an' pastry, and puddings seems to come natural to me, just as it did to my poor mother. Not but what you've a nice light hand with a plain cake yourself, Charity. John's very fond of your cakes, ain't yer, John?'

'Yes, mother,' said John.

('There's noos right enough,' muttered the old man to himself.)

'I must give you my recipe for "Farmhouse Pudding,"' Mrs. Cogbill continued. 'There was a time when I used to say that I wouldn't never give it to nobody, and goodness knows the number that 'ave tried ter get it out of me! But things change as you get on in years, and you don't set so much store by things that used ter seem mighty important once upon a time. Yes, yes! I must give yer the recipe fer that. Eh, John?'

'Yes, mother,' said John.

'If there's one thing as I shall miss more than another when we get into Yew Barn House,' mused Mrs. Cogbill, 'it'll be me cupboards. (Annie! Just come and fetch the pot and put a drop o' boiling water into it! Don't go an' drown it, mind!) You wouldn't believe, Charity, until you come to use 'em, what a lot o' cupboard-space there is in this 'ouse. It was my grandmother as saw to that, according to what my mother used to tell me. A wonderful designing woman she must have been, too! Not a bit of space anywhere that hasn't got a cupboard in it, and good ones, what's more, instead of the gimcrack things as you see in the 'ouses they've been building over Wooton-in-Arden

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way lately. I'll take yer round after tea and show you what I mean. Yes, I shall miss the cupboards in the Yew Barn House, but then, yer see, we shan't want so much storing space as all that, just me an' daddy.'

Charity sat silent, not knowing what to say and scarcely where to look. For very shame, she could not look at John, who was devouring far more tea-cake than was good for him in his anxiety to conceal his embarrassment. For very pity's sake, she could not look at the old man, whose trembling lips seemed to be constantly phrasing the words, 'There's noos right enough! There's noos right enough! There's noos right enough!' She gazed, therefore, now at Mrs. Cogbill and now at the tea-table, yet saw neither very distinctly.

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CHAPTER IV

TEA over, Mrs. Cogbill, true to her promise, took Charity to see the cupboards. John went across to the rickyard, and the old man remained in the porch alone.

The cupboards, indeed, were wonderful. All were of oak, and all were deep, with stout doors. Charity, of course, knew them well enough. Was there not one on the first landing in which she had hidden over and over again, eager to dash out the very moment that John cried 'I spy!' And was there not another that went right round the back of the chimney in the Blue Room, so that an enterprising person who was not very large, and did not mind dust, could go in at one door, pass behind the chimney, and come out at the other door? And was there not yet another beneath the backstairs which it was unsafe to pass in the dusk unless you kept your back quite close to the opposite wall and your eyes on the door of the cupboard, ready to scream loudly at the slightest movement? Was it not in this very cupboard, indeed, that John, when he was a reckless youngster, had concealed himself, well knowing that little Charity would presently pass that way to the dairy? And did he not spring out upon her with a mighty yell, so that she simply fell to the

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stone flags in a dead faint? And was not John soundly trounced by his father for this piece of wickedness?

Oh, yes, Charity knew the cupboards well enough, but she would not for worlds have denied old Mrs. Cogbill the pleasure of once again displaying them.

'Of course,' said the old lady, panting and jingling, 'it'll take yer a fairish time ter get used to the ways of things, and know just where to put yer 'and on the gooseberry jam in the dark and where on the cabbage pickles. And then there's yer bacon to be salted, and yer pork-pies to be made, and yer cowslip wine, and all that, not to mention the dairy work, and the pigs, and the poultry. But I shan't be far away, yer see, and anything as I can tell yer—— (Annie! Where's that girl? Annie! Don't leave the broom lying right across the passage that way, or any one might trip over it in the dark and catch their heads a fine old crack against the banisters, or something o' that. Put it in the broom-cupboard, my girl, and then catch up that tear in the bottom of yer skirt, or maybe you'll be takin' a dive into a pan o' milk!) Let me see, what was I sayin'? These girls keep one on the go so! That's where I always say you and yer Pa are so lucky in 'avin' a steady woman like Mrs. Lilley. 'Pon me word, I often wish as I'd done the same, although they won't run about like the young ones. Yes, I shan't be far away, yer see, and I daresay you'll find it convenient, now and again, to pop across and——'

'But you mustn't talk of leaving Nutlands for a long time yet,' said Charity, forced to bring the conversation to a crisis.

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Mrs. Cogbill stopped short and stared at her in amazement.

'D' you mean ter say as John ain't told yer?'

'He hasn't told me anything.'

'The great zany! D' you mean to say he hasn't told yer as me and the old man 'ave decided to give up the farm come Michaelmas?'

'He hasn't said a word about it, Mrs. Cogbill. But, then, why should he?'

'Oh, go along with yer, Miss Coy!' The old lady gave Charity a sly dig. 'You know well enough, and so does everybody in Littleworth for that matter, as John 's on'y bin waitin' fer me an' the old man to give up the farm to ask you ter marry 'im! Still, it's natural as you shouldn't let on as you knows about it until he pops the question. That's 'ow I used to be, and most of the gals in my day, but they seem to 'ave altered a fairish bit lately, from what I can 'ear. Not you, though, Charity. You're one o' the old-fashioned sort, and all the better for it, to my way o' thinking. You'll make a rare an' good wife fer our lad, and both on us knows it. Now give me a kiss, and then we'll go and look for 'im. 'E's sure not to be far off.'

Look for him? Oh, no; Charity could not do that! She would much rather not, really! Whatever would he think of her, routing him out in that way! Far better wait a while, and let him take his own time about making a formal proposal. There was no hurry, you see; no hurry at all. Yes, it was quite true that they had waited long enough to know each other pretty well, but was not that all the more reason why they should

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not spoil everything at the last by being impetuous? Beside, John might have changed his mind. Men did those things, often and often. He might have met somebody else he preferred—some very pretty, very smart girl, much younger and more amusing than Charity. With more to the same effect, delivered earnestly and pleadingly, the while poor little Charity alternately paled and reddened, and caught Mrs. Cogbill by the arm in the hope of persuading her to change her purpose.

But the old lady was determined to bring the laggard lover to heel. Such nonsense she had never heard! Any one might think, the way John carried on, that he expected to live to be as old as Methuselah. As for changing his mind, John was a gentleman she hoped, for all that his father had made his own way in the world. Met somebody he preferred? A likely story! John was not the man to have his head turned by any little minx with a dolly face and a pair of baby eyes. He knew well enough that Charity was the wife for him—the wife to cherish a man, and mend his clothes, and see that his food was well cooked, and take care of the pence, and keep the place in order, and sit with him before the fire of a winter's evening, and nurse him when he was sick, and maybe, if God saw fit, give him some dear little children to scramble about his knees and protect him lovingly when he was too old to work for himself. . . . Change his mind? Not John! All he wanted was a little help, a little encouragement, and the ordeal of the proposal would be over before either of them knew what had happened.

And so, sadly against her will, Charity was led

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to the rickyard and confronted, suddenly, with her shy lover.

'John,' said Mrs. Cogbill, 'I've been showing Charity the cupboards, and the dairy, and what not.'

'Ah,' said John, resting on his hayfork. So big, and strong, and brown, and healthy, and honest as he looked! A yeoman, every inch of him. But Charity dared not glance that way for many seconds together.

'Your mother's a wonderful manager,' she said, trying to turn the conversation into an ordinary channel. But the old lady was far too cunning for her.

'And so'll you be,' she replied quickly. 'What d'yer think, John?'

'Ah,' said John.

'I've told 'er as me an' the old man are giving up the farm come Michaelmas.'

'Ah?' said John.

'I thought you'd 'ave told 'er yerself, p'r'aps, but it seems as you didn't.'

'I had meant to,' said John, 'but——'

'Well?' demanded the old lady, nudging Charity with her elbow. 'But what?'

'It slipped my memory.'

His mother laughed, and John carefully raked three wisps of straw together, and then scattered them again. Charity watched this gigantic game of spillikins as attentively as though the player had been doing it for a wager.

'That's a nice thing to say, upon my word,' commented Mrs. Cogbill mercilessly. 'But maybe you was thinking of something more important, eh, John?'

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'No, I can't call to mind that I was,' said John.

'P'r'aps you was thinking of what it 'ud mean to you and——' Had her little legs not been trembling so violently, Charity would have fled from the rickyard at this point—'and somebody else? Eh? was that it?'

'Maybe,' said John.

'Well, then, my boy, don't keep a lady waiting.'

This dreadfully frank speech was altogether too much for Charity. She gave a little cry, and turned very white. And then muttering something about 'see if my father wants me,' she turned abruptly, and began to move away.

But old Mrs. Cogbill was again too quick for her. She was determined to bring this affair to a climax before the sun set, or, as she would have put it, know the reason why. Catching Charity deftly by the skirt, therefore, she pulled her back.

'Don't you be a fool, my dear,' she urged. 'And don't you be a fool, John, neither. Here be three people with all of them the same thought in their minds, and all afraid to speak it out. John's the one as ought to speak by rights, but it appears to me that if we left it to him, you two might both live to a hundred and never be any nearer bein' man and wife.'

'Oh, please!' murmured Charity.

'Well, that's true. Now, John, I've give yer an opening. 'Aven't yer got nothing ter say to Charity now?'

'Yes,' said John bravely. Then, his courage failing him once more, he added weakly, 'If she cares to hear it now.'

'No, no! some other time!' said Charity.

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Mrs. Cogbill still clung to her arm.

'There 's no time like the present,' she reminded them stoutly. 'I 'd go away and leave yer to get through it by yerselves, only I know well enough as you 'd begin talkin' about the weather, or something o' that. So come along, my lad. You 'll have enough to say after you 've taken the first plunge, I 'll warrant.'

John cleared his throat and looked at the hayfork. He wished he had not been holding that hayfork. How in the world could a man propose to a girl with a hayfork in his hand. And yet, what could a man do with the thing? It would look absurdly deliberate to lay it down. He half decided to throw it down, but that, after all, would be too dramatic. Besides, the sudden noise might frighten Charity.

His mother, observing his dilemma, came to the rescue.

'Here,' she said, as though this great fellow were a little child again, 'give me the fork, my lad.'

Very willingly John handed it over. A second time he cleared his throat.

'Charity!' he said, in a colloquial tone.

Charity could not speak. Indeed, how could she.

'Good lad,' said old Mrs. Cogbill, in the manner of one encouraging a child to take a powder.

'Charity!' repeated John. And then, with a rush, 'Do you—would you care to marry me at all?'

Still not a word from Charity. John's mother was pinching her arm quite hard, but she scarcely felt it.

'Pitch it in a bit stronger,' urged the old lady, in

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a stage-whisper. 'You don't think as any gal 'ud bite at a bit of a bait like that, do yer?'

Charity's further attempt to wriggle free was easily frustrated.

'I think you know that I—I love you,' said John. 'Anyway, I want you to know it, and I want you to be my wife.'

His speech ended in a little gulp. He felt that he had said all that a man could say. And Charity felt the same. She knew that it was her turn next. Yet the very fact that she had known John for so many years, and that, outwardly, they had never been anything more to each other than dear friends, made it trebly difficult to say and do precisely the right thing at this all-important moment. She could not help thinking, her detestation of ingratitude notwithstanding, that old Mrs. Cogbill was rather in the way. The old lady must have divined this feeling, for her hand slid gently from the girl's arm, and she presently disappeared, a pathetic, kindly, waddling figure, round the corner of the hayrick.

It was then that John, after a slow glance round to make sure that they were unobserved by any of the farm-hands, took two great strides that brought him quite close to Charity. And it was then that he put one enormous arm about those trembling little shoulders, and drew the small woman, so loving and so humble, to his breast. The great red sun, gliding gloriously to rest, never looked upon a troth more honestly or more sweetly plighted.

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CHAPTER V

TWILIGHT held the countryside when Charity crossed the dark lane and entered the garden of the Vicarage. The air was full of the smell of moistening earth. From some flattering perch in the covert at the end of the paddock, a nightingale was calling attention to the ecstatic fact of his being alive, and in very good health, and very wide awake, and in excellent voice.

Mr. Couchman, the labours of the day ended, was putting on an old, green, comfortable coat. He was a heavy, broad-shouldered man, rather inclined to stoop, but full of bodily vigour. Endowed with enormous energy, physical, perhaps, rather than mental—although, to be sure, he had taken a decent degree at Cambridge—the spiritual and sentimental needs of Littleworth proved all too scant to bring him, as evening fell, the grateful sense of fatigue so coveted of every healthy man. There were no week-day services in the tiny parish church of Littleworth, for the very sensible reason that, though there had been, nobody but Mr. Couchman and Charity would have attended them. For the same reason, there was only one service on Sundays, and even then the congregation was mainly composed of children from the Sunday School, and a few very old ladies, the

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latter all of a tremor to ensure a friendly reception in the world to come.

Lest, however, you should run away with the notion that the Rev. Walter Couchman neglected the duty of exhortation, it should be explained that the total population of Littleworth did not exceed one hundred and fifty souls. Of these, the majority were split up into various denominations of which Mr. Couchman had no official cognisance. Of the remainder, some were bedridden and some hopelessly indifferent. Remained, as aforesaid, the children from the Sunday School and the tremulous old ladies.

Mr. Couchman's brother-clergy, whilst deploring the slackness of Anglican Littleworth, were glad enough, none the less, to avail themselves of the Vicar's services on such occasions as they found it necessary or convenient to absent themselves from their own parishes. Mr. Couchman, moreover, was a sturdy and enthusiastic walker, and had a decided advantage over the other disengaged clerics in the neighbourhood for whom it was necessary to send one's pony-trap, with man, or a hired fly. In this manner a welcome guinea occasionally found its way into the pitifully hollow coffers of Littleworth Vicarage.

For all his pedestrianism and his extra preaching, however, Mr. Couchman would have been a fretful and a discontented man had he not luxuriated in one particularly fatiguing hobby. Rather more than eighteen years before this story opens, he had set himself the gigantic task of converting a portion of his paddock into a tennis-lawn. Baldly stated, it must be admitted, the task does not sound

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so formidable, but when you learn that the slope of the paddock was at least one foot in four, so that, in order to make a level lawn, it was absolutely necessary to build an embankment more feet in height than a mere classical scholar was able to estimate beforehand, and when you learn, further, that the Vicar wheeled and emptied every barrow-load of earth that went to the building of this embankment with his own hands, and that he had never received any practical or theoretical instruction in the art of converting paddocks into tennis-lawns, you will understand why this particular tennis-lawn, now actually nearing completion, was the wonder of all the country round, and why Charity had been brought up to regard it with something like awe, and why her father himself constantly marvelled at his own industry, perseverance, and natural skill.

The one thing that troubled him, when he dared to think of the future of the lawn, was this: Who would play upon it? For himself, eighteen years of wheeling and emptying, to say nothing of trudging heavy country roads and sticky field-paths in search of guineas, had bred in him a bitter loathing of the very thought of a tennis-racquet. Charity had abandoned the game in her 'teens, having made the important and certain discovery that all racquets had holes in them at the moment of striking, however innocently sound they might appear when you examined them after losing the point. The young Goodacres of Wooton-in-Arden were players to be sure, but their father kept no trap of any sort, and the young Goodacres were notoriously lazy. Remained

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stray friends in other parishes, to whom, as has been stated, the growth of the lawn was a never-failing topic of interest, yet in whom, during these past eighteen years, a distaste for the more active forms of exercise had been just as surely developing.

The Vicar, when some rash one dared to question him upon the point, had replied—and you must imagine a deep, kindly voice, and a slow, emphatic, take-it-or-leave-it enunciation—as follows:

'My good sir, when I first became Vicar of Littleworth, in the county of Warwickshire, and the diocese of Worcester, three-and-thirty years ago, the Vicarage consisted of two cottages knocked into one. As it now stands, it is a house of considerable dimensions, containing far more rooms than can possibly be occupied by Charity and myself even though we had a couple of bedrooms apiece. To effect these improvements, rendered necessary at the time on account of my growing family, I obtained grants from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and raised subscriptions from people of means, to whom I considered myself, as the temporary holder of the living, entitled to apply. Very well, then. The Vicar who comes after me will benefit by my exertions, and the parish of Littleworth will benefit because it will probably get a better man than would otherwise have been the case.

'The same thing happened with the garden. My original garden was the merest strip of turf, a couple of flower-beds, and a miserable little potato-patch. Now, as you see, I grow rhubarb in abundance, cabbages, cauliflower, lettuces; I have goose-

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berry-bushes, currant-bushes, raspberry-canes, and strawberry-beds; those cucumber-frames I made with my own hands; these flower borders I made, and tend them with my own hands. I planted those rose bushes, and trained those creepers over the uglier portions of the house.

'One thing alone was wanting to render the place a suitable home for a gentleman of taste and social instincts. This thing was a tennis-lawn, in order that he might have the satisfaction of inviting his friends to indulge in pleasant, health-giving, and friendly rivalry within his own gates. In another year, I hope, providing that my health remains good and the winter is not very severe, and granting, also, that I can maintain my average of one hundred barrow-loads of earth a day, in addition to banking, levelling, and stamping, my tennis-lawn will be finished. Whether I live to enjoy the fruits of my labours in welcoming my friends to a game of tennis on the lawn, or whether that privilege is to be reserved for my successor, surely is not a matter of supreme importance. The great thing is that the parish of Littleworth, in the county of Warwickshire, and the diocese of Worcester, at last will have a Vicarage and Vicarage garden worthy to be occupied by a gentleman of education and refinement. Now, if you are ready, sir, let us join our friends at the tea-table.'

Such was the man, honest, determined, frugal, trusting, and such the scene, charming in its very simplicity, sanctified by the loving labour that had gone to the building up of it, that awaited little Miss Charity after the momentous scene in the rickyard recorded in the foregoing chapter.

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'One hundred and thirty-two!' called Mr. Couchman, in a triumphant voice, directly he espied his daughter.

'Really, father!' Charity knew, of course, that this was the tale of barrow-loads for the day. 'I hope you've not over-tired yourself.'

'Not I! I want to touch five thousand for the month, if possible. By the way, my dear, I've also been in to Ullenhall, and there's news — most important news. Guess what it is.'

He put his arm about her shoulders, and they began to pace up and down the garden. Charity, too, had news—news that it would be very hard to tell, and even harder, she feared, to hear. Why, oh, why, she wondered, must the pleasure of one so often bring pain to another? And yet the thought of being John's wife at last, and mistress of Nutlands Farm, was so wonderful, so deliriously exciting, that even Charity could not bear the thought of renunciation. After all, she would not be so far away from this dearly-loved father—only a few yards away.

'Is it—is it anything about the Castle, father?'

'You've heard, you little rascal!'

'Indeed, I've heard nothing whatever about it. Do tell me! Is it let at last?'

'So they told me in Ullenhall this afternoon. I had it from Mr. Gill, at the post-office. It seems that the Castle and grounds have been taken on a long lease by a very rich Birmingham man of the name of—— Dear me! Now I've actually forgotten the name! Stupid of me! Anyhow, I remember Mr. Gill saying that he made his money in the drapery business.'

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'There's Ackrill's in Corporation Street,' suggested Charity. 'It wouldn't be that, would it?'

'That's the name—Ackrill—James T. Ackrill. Trust you to know where the finery comes from!'

Charity smiled to herself, as well she might.

'The drapery business must be a paying concern,' commented the Vicar cheerfully. 'They say this man's worth more than three hundred thousand pounds, and means to try for Parliament. Ullenhall Castle is to be beautifully done up, and have its own electric light, if you please, and there will be any amount of grand doings. You'll have to make yourself a new frock or two, Charity. We're sure to be asked to some of the less important affairs.'

All this he said quite simply, in the manner of one who would never dream of being invited to anything more than the 'less important affairs.' As for Charity, at the very mention of 'grand doings' she began to shrink into herself as surely as the snail shrinks into his shell at the approach of a possible enemy.

'Oh,' she protested, 'I do hope they'll leave me out, father. *You* must go, of course, but I dislike all those swell functions intensely. I'm ever so much happier just pottering about here and among the village people. Besides, my home-made frocks would never do for Ullenhall Castle. All the people there would be laughing at me, and I expect Mr. Ackrill's daughters will all dress beautifully. They have the most lovely things in their windows. I was looking at them only the last time I went into Birmingham by the cheap train—about three or four months ago. And then——'

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'Wait a bit!' interrupted the Vicar, laughing at her timidity. (Charity's intense shyness had always been a family joke.) 'In the first place, Ackrill has no daughters, I hear. He has only one child—a son. At present he is at Oxford, just finishing his third year. Really, it's remarkable how the Ullenhall people get to know everything about their neighbours in less than no time.'

'All the same——' protested Charity.

'There, there!' said the Vicar, patting her shoulder. 'Why, you little goose, I declare you're trembling! You're tired, I expect. You've been overdoing it. Supper will be ready directly, I expect. I can hear Mrs. Lilley rattling the plates. And you know very well, my dear, that I should never try to force you to do anything that was really distasteful to you. I, as you say, must cultivate Mr. Ackrill because he can be so useful in helping us with the restoration of the church, and relieving some of the want among the poor people in the winter. But you shan't be dragged out of your snug little nest against your will by the lord of Ullenhall Castle or anybody else. I promise you that. I can't say more, can I?'

He felt a tender, grateful pressure on his arm, and his eyes filled with tears of thankfulness for the love of this dear little woman—all that was left of the home circle to cheer the evening of his days.

But Charity, who knew from long and tender association, and also of her intense sympathy, all that he was thinking, felt her heart very heavy within her.

After supper, since the night was beautifully

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soft, and fine, and warm, Mr. Couchman went again into the garden to smoke his pipe. Charity promised to join him so soon as she had helped Mrs. Lilley to wash up the supper-things.

Mrs. Lilley had been a good servant and a faithful friend to the Couchman family as long as Charity could remember. Littleworth Vicarage without Mrs. Lilley would have seemed a queer, vacant place indeed. A shrewd, patient, good-hearted soul, she had attached herself to the Couchmans in the true spirit of service, and asked nothing better than to be in attendance upon some member of it, at any rate, until the weight of years rendered her an encumbrance instead of a help. Against that day she had steadily put by a few pounds each year, yet had her days of 'jollification,' too, when she went into Birmingham by the cheap train with Mrs. Coppage, heard all the tittle-tattle coming and going, and stared dispassionately, if not disapprovingly, at the 'new-fangled gimcracks' in the shop-windows. As you may often notice when a servant has been for many years in the same situation, Mrs. Lilley had acquired the ways of thinking, and, to some extent, even the same forms of speech as the Couchman family.

Granted that you were a person of some education and discernment, upon whom intellectual conversation would not be thrown away, you had only to talk a very few minutes with Mrs. Lilley to discover that she was a thinker of considerable importance, and had an astonishingly comprehensive vocabulary. To hear her in the train on the way to Birmingham, or gossiping in the village

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shop, you would never suppose that this was the same woman who now, as she busily washed while Charity wiped, expounded her views upon self-made men of great wealth.

'You see, Miss Charity,' said Mrs. Lilley, 'with regard to this here Ackrill, as they say is coming to the Castle, we ought to be careful to guard against 'roneous impressions beforehand. What I mean is, if you understand me, vulgar prejudice. Now, in one way of speaking, I'm not an educated woman, Miss Charity, but what I am, I'm impartial. Somebody was saying—Mrs. Bonehill I think it was, I met her just against the church as I was coming up—she was saying that these Brummagem platocrats—that wasn't the word she used, of course, but I knew what she meant—was all tarred with the same brush, so to speak, but as I told 'er, to my mind, I said, that sort of talk's always unfair and prejudicialised. I don't know what your opinion may be.'

'I quite agree with you,' said Charity. 'Oughtn't there to be another fork?'

'Blest if I didn't nearly leave it in the water. Well, it wouldn't 'ave got much further than the sink, that's certain. Yes, it's prejudicialised; that's what it is. Let a man be what he may, we ought not to condemn him without giving the pore feller a fair hearing. Of course, I don't deny as I wouldn't rather see one of the real old county families up at the Castle, such as the Hetheringtons, for instance, or the Godchilds. But their day's past and gone, yer see. They can't afford ter keep up these c'lossal places with agriculture in the state in what it is, and what's

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the good of trying to maintain the uncivilised struggle?'

'It's the same all over the county,' said Charity.

'Quite so; that's the identical remark as I made to Mrs. Bonehill, poor woman. But you can't expect people of that class, Miss Charity, to look at things in the philosophy way, same as you and me and your Pa might. Mrs. Bonehill seems ter think as Ackrill will be for putting up all the rents, and turning all the regular men off the estate and getting new ones from Brum. But, as I say, why should he? If it's true that he wishes to become a Parliamentarian, he'll have to mind his p's and q's a bit! What's your opinion, Miss Charity?'

'I don't see why we should run after trouble. After all, it's far better that there should be a tenant at the Castle than that it should stand empty. Mr. Ackrill's bound to bring some money into the neighbourhood.'

'Quite so. I knew that was the way you'd be inclined to look at it, Miss Charity, and so will yer Pa. It wouldn't be such a bad thing if he was to make some reference to the matter in his sermon come Sunday. Not that it's any of my business, I know, to dictate to yer Pa what he shall preach about and what 'e shan't, but a stitch in time's better than trying to catch up arterwards, as they say, and Ackrill could do a lot for yer Pa as ought to 'ave bin done years and years ago, ter my mind.'

This utilitarianism rather shocked Charity, who liked to think that her father's sermons, however familiar the subject and however dog-eared the manuscript, were the outcome of direct inspiration.

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'I don't think he would be likely to use his pulpit for his own material benefit,' she said gently.

'Very likely not,' returned Mrs. Lilley, carrying the plates and dishes over to the dresser and restoring each to its right place. 'But there are times to think of bodily comfort and times to think of spiritual. Yer Pa's not a young man, Miss Charity; you've got to remember that. And his eyesight troubles him more and more. I'm sure I was all of a tremble last Sunday evening when he had to have the candles lighted before he could read out the text of his sermon. Everybody was talking about it afterwards, and Mrs. Bonehill, the sauce-piece, had the impertinence to say as it was time he was making way for a younger man.'

'Oh!' cried Charity involuntarily. For we never see that those near and dear to us are growing old save through the eyes of a stranger.

'I'm only telling you what she said, Miss Charity. I soon put a stop to such defamation, as you may imagine. "If the Vicar's ageing a bit," I said, "it's through wearing himself out trying to save a baggage like you from the place where you ought by rights to go," I said. That put the stopper on 'er. But what one says, another thinks, Miss Charity, and if I was you I should get yer Pa ter make friends with this Ackrill, and maybe he'd substantiate him with a curate. That's what I should do.'

And with this sage piece of worldly counsel, Mrs. Lilley bustled off upstairs to turn down the beds.

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CHAPTER VI

THE Vicar had walked from the 'Damson Dell' to the far end of the garden and back just eighteen times when the click of the drive-gate warned him of the approach of a caller. Through the soft darkness of the summer evening, he could just discern the form of a tall, broad-shouldered young man.

'Is that John Cogbill?' he called, at a venture.

'Yes, Mr. Couchman,' came the sturdy reply.

But the firm tone of John's voice belied his state of mind. He had been sent across by his mother to make formal application to the Vicar for the hand of Charity, and John did not relish the task at all. True, it was not quite so bad as the proposal, but John had never quite shaken off his boyish awe of this very wise and very good gentleman in the long black coat. Apart from that, it was not a pleasant task, reflected John, to ask a man to give you the only daughter left to him.

However, it was too late to turn back now. Stepping gingerly across the new lawn, therefore, lest his stout boots should leave an ugly impress for the morrow, he took Mr. Couchman's outstretched hand, and gave it a terrific grip.

'A beautiful night,' said the Vicar.

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'Oh, yes,' said John. 'There's not much wrong with the night.'

This was as far as he would permit himself to go on the subject of the weather. A farmer will speak in terms of eulogy of a rival; he will even, when in liquor, commend warmly the good qualities of his wife; drunk or sober, though, the best that you will ever get him to say for the weather is that it might possibly be worse. The English climate is made to run the gauntlet for a good deal of bad farming. It should be added, in common justice, that John Cogbill was held to know as much about the science as 'any one round.'

'Most of your hay in?' asked Mr. Couchman.

'Shan't be long if it holds up.'

'Ah! Better than last year, eh?'

''Bit,' said John.

Turning, they walked to the end of the garden. The nightingale in the covert was still revelling in shameless advertisement.

'Mother and father quite well, I hope?' asked the Vicar. He guessed that there was some particular reason for this visit, and wondered, in an amused way, how long it would take John to come to the point. Perhaps he wanted to withdraw from the Parish Council—delicious farce!—or knew of somebody who needed a vote for the hospital at Stratford-on-Avon. It never occurred to Mr. Couchman that the affair between John and Charity, which had simmered and simmered for so many years, had at last come to the boiling-point—if the expression be not too violent.

'The old man ages,' said John.

'Well,' said the Vicar, who always looked upon

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himself as a young and sprightly man compared to old Mr. Cogbill, 'you can't expect anything else, you know. After all, he carries his years wonderfully well.'

'He's giving up the farm.'

'Indeed? I hadn't heard that. Immediately?'

'At Michaelmas.'

'Really!' The Vicar, suddenly realising the importance of this news, stopped and looked through the shadows into the face of his companion. 'Then you'll be master? Eh?'

'Yes,' said John, looking back at the Vicar. 'I shall be master.'

'And you'll'—here Mr. Couchman tried nobly to make his tone light and jocular—'you'll be thinking of getting married at last, John?'

'Yes,' said John. Then he tried to clear his throat—but failed. 'That's just what I came to see you about, sir.'

The 'sir' slipped out quite naturally, for poor John felt very mean and small at that moment. And, as the familiar term fell upon his ears, the Vicar's mind went back and back over the years, and he saw John and Charity, the boy big and strong, the girl so tiny and confiding, running hand-in-hand to meet him down the cool, moss-carpeted lane, or scrambling and sliding, with shrieks of laughter, among the ricks in the rickyard at Nutlands.

And now John was grown a man with a large farm of his own, and little Charity was a woman, and they were to be married, and try to help each other over the long, long road. The long road? It seemed short enough to Mr. Couchman, as he

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stood there that summer night and travelled it yet once again with leaping memory. One more bend and then he, too, like John's father, would be too old to take his part in the fight. One more bend.

Steadying himself with an effort, he put out his hand.

'I wish you every happiness, John,' he said. 'You have worked well and patiently for your father, and I know no man for whom I have more respect. Have you—have you told Charity of this?'

'Yes,' said John thankfully.

'And she—she——?'

'Yes, sir, with your permission.'

'You know that you had that years ago. I won't deny that I think you're a lucky fellow, John. You'll find it out some day. Yes, I know you appreciate her sweetness, and goodness, and gentleness even now, but the time will come when—Never mind. God bless you both! Now, if you'll excuse me, my dear fellow, I'll just have a quiet pipe on it by myself. Good-night, good-night.'

Charity called her father three times before he answered. When, at last, she came up to him, his boisterous joviality took her by surprise.

'Well,' he said laughing as he gripped her by the arms, 'and so you thought to make a fool of your poor old father, did you?'

'I don't understand,' said Charity.

'You don't, don't you? I suppose not! But you can't keep anything from me very long, you know; I'm bound to find out before long. I learn things in all sorts of ways. For instance, d'you hear that

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little fellow singing away down in the covert? Well, he's just told me a most tremendous piece of news. All about a dear little girl who's been in love for a great many years, and at last is going to be married, but tried to keep the whole thing a secret from her old daddy!'

'How did you really hear?' asked Charity softly. She nestled nearer to him as she spoke, for be very sure that his manner did not deceive her.

'John told me himself.'

'Has he been here?'

'Just gone. I wished him every happiness, dear, from the very bottom of my heart, and I wish you the same.'

He stooped and kissed her forehead.

The thought of the house and lighted rooms appealed to neither of them just then, so they remained in the garden a while, strolling to and fro and discussing all that this change would mean, or as much of it at any rate as they dared to realise at that moment.

'Of course,' said Charity, 'we shan't be married for a long while yet.'

The Vicar laughed, and pressed the little hand that was resting on his arm.

'Indeed!' he said. 'Are you both so much in love with waiting that you can't bear to give it up?'

'Oh, but this is different,' explained Charity. 'We were never really engaged, you see. We must be engaged for at least a year, if not two.'

'Is that the fashion? I'm bound to say I don't see any other reason.'

'Are you so anxious to be rid of me?'

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'My dear!'

'Well then!' Such an indignant little person as was marching alongside.

'You know what this change will mean to me, but John's claim is far, far stronger than mine. And then, more important than all, comes the question of your own happiness.'

'But how can I be happy, daddy, if I think that you are lonely.'

'Never think anything of the kind, my dear. I'm getting to be an old man——'

'Nonsense,' protested Charity, holding him very tightly.

'Oh, yes, I am. I'm not afraid of old age, dear. I've done what I could with my life in my small way, and soon the time must come when I shall hand over this living to somebody else. A third of the income will not amount to very much, you know, and I should have been very worried about my little girl's future if this had not happened. So, you see, dear, instead of making me unhappy by promising to become John's wife, you have really taken a great weight off my mind.'

He looked down, smiling, and their eyes met. Charity nestled closer.

'There are just two plans,' she said, 'and you can choose whichever you like the better. Either I stay here with you until you resign the living, or you resign as soon as I am married, and come and live with John and me at Nutlands. So make up your mind.'

'It's very sweet of you, my dear, and, if there's a corner for an old man who won't give more trouble than he can help, I should be very happy with

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you and John after I resign the living. But I want to go on working as long as I can, and there's the lawn to finish and all sorts of things.'

'Then I——'

'No, you don't. You get married to John as soon as possible so that you may both be settled, and that all my anxiety on your behalf may be removed. Why, goodness me, what a fuss we make about one little person moving across a lane! Anybody would think you were indispensable!'

At this Charity pretended to be mightily offended, so that she must draw her hand away without further parley and flounce away into the house, head erect. But the Vicar, laughing, kept her a prisoner, and then they both laughed and felt very much better for it. Sweet, kindly, glorious Laughter! How many of us would but creep through this vale of tears to the end had we not You to comfort us, You to lean upon, You to light our path!

'How odd it will seem!' mused Charity, presently. 'I shall be a sort of guest here, I suppose, and always on my good behaviour. I shall have to keep on very good terms with Mrs. Lilley, or she may resent my numerous visits. The first will be before breakfast, just to see how you are this morning, and how you have slept, and what letters you have. And the next will be about eleven, when my house is all in order'— Oh, the pride of her as she uttered those two words!—'and you are just about to take your egg-and-milk. And then, of course, for a moment after lunch. I shall probably bring John with me after lunch. Will you mind?'

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'I should think John might possibly have something to say if his wife is dashing out twenty times a day!'

'Indeed! Then he had better cry off before it's too late!'

'Not much chance of his doing that. He loves you, dear.'

Charity was as still as a little mouse, and all in a moment.

'What makes you say that, daddy?' The question came so softly.

'Because of the way he asked me for you, little girl. You have won the love of a fine, true, clean, honest man. It's a great thing, Charity, a thing to treasure up in your heart and thank God for.'

'I love him, too,' whispered Charity.

'I'm sure you do, or you wouldn't marry him. He's a man that a girl might be proud to love.'

'Oh, I am proud of it, daddy, and I'm so amazed that he should bother his head about a little insignificant person like me, because I'm not a bit pretty, or clever, or——'

'My dear, I don't like to hear you speak disparagingly of yourself. I told John that I thought him a lucky man—luckier, probably, than he could understand at present—and he spoke of you with deep tenderness.'

The reply was a happy, catchy little sigh, that came from somewhere near the Vicar's elbow. After that, they paced up and down for a while in silence, the one thinking of a life that was beginning, the other of a life that was drawing to a close.

Suddenly, through the still night air, came the

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voice of Mrs. Lilley. They could see her comfortable figure silhouetted against the light from the lamp in the hall.

'Now, then,' called Mrs. Lilley, 'are you two going to walk about on the damp grass all the night, and get yer deaths of cold?'

'Run, run!' cried Charity gaily, dragging at her father's arm. So they ran, and Mrs. Lilley, seeing them coming, and fearing that she might be the last in from the dark garden, ran too, and there was a deal of noise and laughter as they all arrived in the hall in a bunch.

Click went the locks; thud-thud the bolts. The light disappeared from the hall; other lights shone out from the upper windows. One of these, in particular, was kept burning for a long time. Charity was recording in her 'Confidence-Book' the manifold events of this wondrous day.

Shall we take the liberty of peeping into her room?

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CHAPTER VII

CHARITY'S room was the little, queer-shaped corner one, with the gabled windows that looked out towards the church. She might have had a much larger and more imposing apartment when her sisters left the Vicarage. Sometimes, indeed, she would sleep in the spare room or the Blue Room to keep them aired, but their size appalled her; she felt quite lost in the big double-beds, and was thankful to find herself once again in her own little den, surrounded by her treasured possessions.

So rich in nicknacks and trinkets as was Charity! Each birthday and each Christmas Day added to her store, so that it was only by the most ingenious management that she contrived to display them all. The mantelpiece, the chest-of-drawers, the top shelf of the bookcase, and the writing-table were thickly dotted with photographs of all sizes in every imaginable variety of frame. Photographs of her dead mother; photographs of her father; photographs of her sisters; photographs of uncles, and aunts, and cousins; photographs of friends and acquaintances; photographs of Charity herself in funny little groups—snapshots these, for the most part; a photograph of John on horseback, and another photograph of

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John, given to Charity by old Mrs. Cogbill in a sudden burst of generosity, at the age of two; photographs of Littleworth Church, and the Vicarage, and Ullenhall Street, and Ullenhall Castle, and Stratford-on-Avon Church, and Shakespeare's house, and Warwick Castle, and Kenilworth Castle; a snapshot of Mrs. Lilley shelling peas outside the kitchen-door, and a snapshot of the Vicar at work upon the famous lawn. Together with many other photographs that we cannot 'take in' all at once, and a print or two, and some little amateur sketches and water-colours.

It was wonderful, indeed, that Charity had managed to find frames for so many photographs and pictures, but she had. True, they were not very beautiful or costly frames. The whole collection, perhaps, pictures included, would not have realised a sovereign. Charity never thought of that. Sufficient for her that her pictorial treasures were preserved from the ravages of damp and dust. Many of the frames were presents; some she had bought herself; the others she had manufactured. Charity was justly proud of her home-made frames. A piece of plain glass cut to size by the obliging glazier at Ullenhall, a bit of cardboard for backing, some stout material with the edges turned over the glass and securely gummed, a little loop, a tin tack—and there you had Mrs. Lilley or the bust of Shakespeare adorning the wall in the most dignified manner, and looking far more ornate, as Mrs. Lilley herself said, than a picture in a 'constitutional' shop-frame.

There were texts, too, for Charity did not know

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—nor would she have paid much heed if she had known—that this form of wall decoration was no longer considered quite the thing among the smarter sort of folk. Over her bed—the narrow iron bed that she had slept in as long as she could remember—hung a sacred promise, tricked out with many a flourish, of perfect safety during the night; another text, which Charity had placed immediately opposite the bed so that her eyes might rest upon it the very first thing in the morning, exhorted her to be up and doing; whilst a third served to remind her that her life had not been given to her for personal pleasure, but for the benefit of others.

But the quaintest of the mural decorations in Charity's room was a tiny sampler that hung just above the exhortation to early rising. It had been presented to Charity by her mother, who had received it, in turn, from her mother, to whom it had been given by an old nurse. The sampler read as follows:—

LOST

Somewhere Between Sunrise and Sunset

TWO GOLDEN HOURS

Each Set With

SIXTY DIAMOND MINUTES

No Reward is Offered

for they are

LOST FOR EVER.

At a very early age, this curious document had made a deep impression upon Charity. She had pictured the two golden hours, each set with sixty

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diamond minutes, lying in a ditch or a wood, and had been very much concerned that articles of such value should really be lost for ever. There was a hopelessness about that 'no reward is offered' which depressed the thumb-sucking Charity. Later, when she had come to understand the exact purpose and meaning of the sampler, her admiration for the extreme ingenuity of the wording was tempered by the awful fear that she might herself some day, between sunrise and sunset, lose two golden hours, each set with sixty diamond minutes. Thus did the industry of the old nurse, dead and gone these many years, continue to bear fruit.

But Charity, at the end of the day on which this story opens, played the prodigal with the silver hours dedicate to slumber. For nearly an hour after bidding her father good-night and closing the door of her room, she did not even slip on a dressing jacket or brush out her hair, but sat at the open window, listening to the whispering orchestra of the still summer night. How shyly the leaves of the trees all around kissed each other, despite the friendly shelter of the darkness! Yet the scarce distinguishable harmony of their million caresses had its share in the universal melody of Nature. The tinkling of the tiny brook that fed the pool in the paddock formed, perhaps, the predominant strain, whilst the sudden ding-dong of the church clock down there in the vale, as it solemnly told the quarters, set a significant period to each passage.

Charity loved the old clock. It was a great day, indeed, for Littleworth when an earlier owner of Ullenhall Castle wrote out the cheque that was to

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rebuild the tower and set the clock a-ticking—slowly, slowly, slowly—above the heads of the villagers. Charity could not remember the occasion, but she had been brought up to regard the clock with no little awe.

There was a day of thrilling memory when she had been conducted up the winding steps of the tower for the first time, and had gazed with amazement upon the great pendulum, swinging majestically to and fro, to and fro, to and fro, in a room all by itself; and had then climbed higher, and seen, in the room above the pendulum, the works of the clock in a huge wooden case, with a great bar running this way and that way, to which were attached the slowly-moving hands; and had then climbed higher yet, to the room where the bells hung, each with its gigantic wheel, and been half-stunned and terrified nearly out of the very world of Time itself by the wholly unexpected clang-clang of the hammers on the bells as the clock chimed the quarter.

Charity had ascended the tower many times since then, but never without a sense of awe, and of daring, and of mystery. She loved better to sit at her window, as she was doing now, and hear the strokes come booming up to her through the stillness and the darkness. There was something protective, Charity thought, about the old clock. Day by day and night by night it watched over the little village; it told its children the hour for rising in the morning, the hour for the simple mid-day meal, the hour for leaving the fields when the work of the day was done, the hour for retiring to

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rest. A friend and counsellor to young and old, it saw the tiny babies brought to the church to be christened, the young couples to be married, the dead to be buried. In storm and sunshine, in winter and summer, through bad times and good times, the old clock, Charity would fancy, recorded the acts, worthy or unworthy, that had gone to make up the day in the little world over which it reigned.

Eleven! Charity shook out her hair, brushed it, tied it back with a ribbon, slipped into an easy costume, and then, at last, drew forth her treasured 'Confidence-Book.' Lest it may seem odd to you that so simple and sensible a little person as Charity should indulge in so fashionable a folly, let me explain that the 'Confidence-Book' was one of the birthday-presents, the collection of a life-time, aforementioned. It was bound in soft, nice-smelling leather, and its pages, of delicate pinks and blues, were thick and glossy. Charity had blushed heartily when she unpacked it. She was not accustomed to receiving such grand presents, and she had forthwith laid it away, in many wrappings of tissue-paper, to be looked at and fondled at rare intervals.

One night, however, she had been irresistibly tempted to write a few words in the book. Her heart was very full of happiness that night, and nothing would relieve her but to copy a verse from Wordsworth on the opening page. How easily her pen glided over the smooth surface! How nice her writing looked against the blue background! The next night she added a few words of her own

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—a simple thought, sacred to Charity, which nobody must ever see. And now the volume, thus begun, was more than half-filled.

'The most wonderful day of my life,' wrote Charity to-night, 'a day that I shall never forget as long as I live. Something has happened at last that I thought never, never would happen. In a way, I think I was afraid of it happening, and yet I wanted it to, oh! so much. . . . *John has told me that he loves me, and has asked me to be his wife!*

'It *is* true, isn't it? Oh, yes, I know it is true, and yet even now I hardly dare believe it. It seems so wonderful that a great, fine man like that, a man respected by everybody, and with a big farm of his own, and men to work for him, should ask a poor little person like me to be his wife—*his wife!*—and should *love* me.

'People say that love begets love. If that is true, it may explain John's loving me, because, although I have never let him know it until to-night, and would rather have died a thousand times over than let him know it, I have loved him very, very dearly almost ever since I can remember. Perhaps I am a little witch, and have bewitched him! No, I shouldn't like to think that, because something might happen to interrupt the charm, and then he would leave off loving me, and my heart would break. Oh, yes, my heart would break if he ever left off loving me, because he is everything to me now, just *all* my life!

'I wonder if I am as much to him. I don't think it can be possible, because men don't love in the same way as women, they say. Men have other things to think about, and work to do, and

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money to earn. But women just live for the man they love, to make his home nice for him, and look after him, and cherish him. Oh, how I long for the day to come when I may cherish and take care of the man I love! Is it immodest of me to say that, even to you, my dear book? I hope not, but if it is, I can't help it, because I must tell somebody and I have nobody else to tell. Daddy wouldn't quite understand, and I'm afraid Mrs. Lilley, sweet old thing as she is, would laugh at me. Other girls, I suppose, tell their girl-friends these things, but I haven't any, and so I am telling You, and it must just be a secret between us.

'Good-night, dear John, my love, my darling! I wonder whether you are fast asleep at this moment, or whether you are thinking of me as I am of you. If you are asleep, I don't mind, because your work is so hard and you ought to have plenty of sleep. But, whichever you are, I send you here all, *all* my love, and I pray God that He will watch over you, and bless you, and never let you be unhappy, and never, *never*, NEVER let you regret *for one single instant* that you have asked me to be your wife.

'And so ends this dear day, the sweetest day of my life.'

Charity read over what she had written, and blushed at her own temerity. The pages being dry, she closed the book, kissed it, and put it away at the very bottom of her most private drawer.

Then, kneeling down by the side of the little iron bed, her face buried in her hands, she prayed for her father, her sisters, and all her relations and friends.

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She prayed for Triss Palins and her father, and many others for whom room had been found in that warm little heart. Last of all she repeated the new prayer—the prayer that she had just written in the 'Confidence-Book.'

As the church clock told the hour of midnight, Charity laid her head on the pillow and was soon steeped in sweet slumber.

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BOOK II

SECOND PLAYER PLAYS LOW

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CHAPTER VIII

A TINY cloud, no bigger than a dainty feminine envelope, appeared on the horizon next morning.

'Two for you, dear,' said the Vicar, sorting the letters just left by the postman. 'Isn't that Philippa's handwriting?'

Yes, that was Philippa's handwriting, and Charity experienced an unpleasant little sinking sensation as she looked at it. Try as hard as she might, Charity could not like her cousin Philippa. To be sure, the girls had little enough in common. Whilst Charity stayed at home, and kept house for her father, and busied herself in the little village, Philippa travelled hither and thither among her friends, staying at this house and that, and sharing, as far as she could, the lives of the moneyed drones.

Again, Philippa, who was an orphan, had one hundred and fifty pounds a year of her own. This sum, though constantly execrated by the owner for its inadequacy, seemed a small fortune to Charity. Even Philippa managed to buy a good many clothes with it, to pay her railway-fares, tip servants, and, granted average luck at bridge, to keep out of debt.

Charity opened the letter, inwardly rebuking herself for the feeling of depression that had

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suddenly descended upon her—swift reaction after the emotion of the previous evening and the gaiety of the early morning.

Philippa, whom Charity had not seen and scarcely heard of since her cousin had paid a convenient visit to the Vicarage five years ago, wrote as follows:—

'MY DEAR OLD GIRL,—I wonder what in the *world* you will think of me for not having written to you all this long time! The truth is that I have been simply rushed off my legs lately—you know what a creature I am for flying about — and literally have not had a moment to myself to write to any one. All the same, I don't think I should ever have plucked up courage to write to you again on this side of the grave if you weren't such a dear, forgiving little soul, and always so lenient with your silly, flighty cousin!

'I need not tell you how I have been *longing* to see you and Uncle Walter again! I always look back with such intense pleasure to my last visit to Littleworth—so quiet and peaceful, and so different to many of the noisy places into which my poor homeless little feet are compelled to wander. Well, at last an opportunity presents itself, but do not hesitate to tell me, Charity dearest, if I shall be the *tiniest* little bit in the way. The fact is, I am staying here with the Ecclestons until the fourteenth, and then have no engagement until the beginning of the month, when I go on to the Stroud-Smiths at their place near Evesham. And it occurred to me that it would be awfully jolly if you could have me in the meantime, and we could tell each other all

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our news, and have a splendid gossip, and you could take me some of those delightful rambles that we used to go, and introduce me to your pet picturesque villagers, you funny, dear little thing! But do tell me if it isn't quite convenient, won't you, Charity dearest? Because I can easily get some rooms or something to save my going all the way back to town, only, naturally, I would *much* rather stay with you and dear Uncle Walter.

'Please give him my fondest love, if he has not quite forgotten his harum-scarum niece. I am simply *dying* to see how the lawn is getting on.

'Well, good-bye now, dear old girl. Let me know by return, won't you, as I shall not have much time to make other arrangements if you cannot have me. Excuse this fearful scribble. I am supposed to be billiard-marker at the present moment, and they keep on slanging me for not paying attention.—With tons of love, darling, Ever your affectionate cousin, PHIL.

'*P.S.* In case you can have me, will you ask Uncle Walter to let me have a *full* list of trains and directions for getting to your station—I even forget the name of it!'

'Well?' said the Vicar. 'No bad news, I hope?'

'Oh, no, dear. She wants to stay here for a fortnight from the fourteenth.'

'Capital! She'll be company for you, and she'll help you to get your trousseau ready.'

Charity did not reply. The expression on her face caused her father to ask, 'Would you rather she didn't come?'

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'Oh, no,' replied Charity again. 'But I—I don't want her to help me with — in the way you suggested. In fact——'

'Yes, dear?'

'Well, I would really rather that she didn't know anything about my engagement to John.'

'But she's bound to hear about it. I expect all the village will be talking about it to-day. Mrs. Cogbill won't keep it to herself, you may depend.'

'Well, then, I would rather tell her myself. I don't want there to be any—any joking about it.'

'Of course not, of course not.' The Vicar patted her shoulder reassuringly. 'I quite understand. You shall tell her yourself and in your own way. Now I must get on with my work.' He took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. 'Philippa will be astonished, I think, at the difference in the lawn since she was here last. Eh? Don't you think so?'

'I'm sure she will,' said Charity thoughtfully.

Three days later, Philippa Secretan arrived. The dog-cart from the 'King's Arms' was sent over to Ullenhall station to meet her, and Charity, feeling very shy and nervous, went with it. The Vicar had suggested that Philippa should walk across the fields from the station, a distance of two miles only, and leave her luggage to be brought on in the morning by the grocer. But Charity pointed out, with some fervour, that Philippa was accustomed to every comfort, and offered to forego her next trip to Birmingham in order to make up for the extravagance. The Vicar brushed the offer aside with a wave of his spade, and the dog-cart was duly ordered.

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Philippa alighted daintily from a first-class carriage. This alone was sufficient to throw Charity off her balance. She had only been in a first-class carriage once in her life, and that was on a certain Christmas Eve when all the third-class compartments were full. Philippa did not mention that the ticket had been paid for by an impoverished undergraduate with whom she had flirted, for lack of any one better, whilst staying with the Ecclestons, and to whom she had graciously accorded permission to see her off that morning.

'How do you do?' said Charity, smiling timidly.

'Darling!' cried Philippa, thinking what a grotesque little fright her cousin looked.

The girls kissed, Philippa bending graciously. Her tailor-made coat and skirt showed off her trim, tallish figure to splendid advantage. Charity was wearing the smartest of her home-made blouses — a pink cotton confection, with tight sleeves.

'Any luggage, miss?'

'A hat-box in the carriage,' replied Miss Secretan haughtily, 'and two trunks in the van. I'm sorry, Charity, dearest, to have brought such a pile of luggage, but it's my dismal fate, you see, to travel about with all my household gods.'

'It doesn't matter a bit,' said Charity.

'You sweet little thing! You always make everything so nice for one! How well you're looking, and you haven't changed a scrap. How's Uncle Walter? Oh, and do tell me if the lawn is finished yet? I'm simply dying to know.'

'Not quite, but I expect you'll notice a difference.'

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The ostler from the 'King's Arms,' one Artie Yarwood, pulled the corners of his mouth down as he looked at the two big trunks.

'I don't see 'ow we 're goin' ter take 'em all *this* journey, Miss Charity.'

'Oh, but I *must* have them with me!' cried Philippa. 'Surely they 'll go at the back of the cart!'

'Yer see,' explained Artie, 'there 's three on us besides, and the old mare 'as bin ter Wooton-in-Arden and back this morning. I shouldn't mind ser much if she was fresh, but—I suppose you and the young lady wouldn't care to walk across the fields, Miss Charity? I could manage all right then.'

'Walk?' exclaimed Philippa. 'I couldn't possibly walk across all those rough, dirty fields. I should ruin my dress and cut my shoes to ribbons.'

'If you don't mind driving with the man,' said Charity, 'I'll walk, and then he can take the luggage at the back.'

Oh, but Philippa couldn't think of allowing such a thing! That would be most—What? Didn't Charity really mind? Well, if she wasn't frightened of the cows, and wouldn't be lonely, and since the stupid horse was so tired, perhaps, after all, that would be the best way out of the difficulty. And so the dog-cart drove away, with Philippa waving a neatly gloved hand from the seat beside Mr. Yarwood, and the big trunks tied in at the back with a piece of stout cord. Charity, for her part, set out briskly to cover the two miles across the fields.

Artie Yarwood was a pleasant, red-faced young man, with fair, curly hair and innocent, blue eyes.

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Philippa, to whom a man, no matter what his age or station in life, was a person to be conciliated with a view to future use, soon got into conversation with him. After regretting that her cousin should be compelled to walk, and inquiring the distance to the Vicarage, she said she supposed her companion was very fond of horses.

Artie, anticipating a lecture on kindness to dumb animals, replied, 'Oh, ah,' and added, somewhat hastily, that he had already read *Black Beauty*.

Presently they caught a glimpse, through the trees, of a distant mansion, built of white stone that had long since turned grey, with imposing turrets at four corners.

'Let me see,' said Philippa. 'Whose place is that? I forget.'

Artie Yarwood's tongue was at once unloosed.

'That be Hullen'all Castle,' he explained proudly. 'Stood empty this long time back, but now it's bin took by a very rich gentleman from Birmingham—Mr. James Ackrill—the same as keeps that there 'normous shop in Corporation Street. Come on, old gal!'

Philippa was mightily interested.

'Indeed? Is he living there now?'

'Not yet, miss, but 'e's over pretty nigh every day, and there's a swarm o' men paintin' and paperin' an' suchlike. They're buildin' a big engine-shed in the grounds fer the 'lectric-light, an' makin' a motor-pit, and puttin' Mr. Ackrill's arms up over the drive-gate, and cuttin' down trees so as folks can see the Castle from the road. It won't be long now, they say, afore 'e moves in. It'll

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make a sight o' difference to the Hullen'all folk, yer know, miss, 'avin' a rich man like that at the Castle.'

Philippa's little brain was working twice as fast as any dynamo.

'I suppose he's very wealthy, indeed, then?'

'Arf-a-million, they say. Come on, old gal!'

'Married?' Philippa's tone was just sufficiently careless.

'Widower, miss.'

'Any family?'

'Only one, miss—a son.'

'At school, I suppose?'

'At Oxford college, miss, 'cordin' to what I heard.'

Philippa was silent a while. A rich widower with one son at Oxford and no other children. The man had made his money in trade, and would therefore expect the son to marry into a titled family, if possible; at any rate, to marry very well. Half-a-million! Philippa's head swam as she allowed herself to dream of the possibilities wrapped up in half-a-million. At the Stroud-Smiths she would meet the ordinary tennis-playing solicitor and half-a-dozen penniless, pink-skinned boys.

'Come on, old gal!' said Artie Yarwood.

The admonition was not intended for Philippa, but it prompted her to ask:

'Do the people about here expect that Mr. Ackrill will entertain at all?'

'Well,' said Artie, 'they say 'e's goin' ter stand fer Parlyment, an', if so, 'e's bound ter make 'isself a bit pleasant, so ter speak. We was talkin', on'y

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last night, of seein' if we couldn't get a bit out of 'im fer our cricket club. I dessay,' observed Mr. Yarwood, with a short laugh, 'they 'll all be at 'im fer somethink or another.'

Stand for Parliament? Make himself pleasant? That meant, among other things, conciliating the local clergy. 'Always butter the parsons,' she had heard a political expert say at a dinner-party a few nights before. 'In these country places, the rascals can talk over more votes, either one way or the other, than the candidate's wife with a ton of tea in the tonneau.'

Mr. Ackrill would have to show some courtesy to her uncle. A garden-party, followed by an invitation to dinner. 'And won't you bring your charming niece?' Then the heir, the only child, this Oxford boy, showing her round the garden in the moonlight after dinner. Her prettiest frock, her gayest laugh, her subtlest compliment. 'I say, you are a jolly good sort! All the other girls round here are so beastly slow! I wish you'd bike over to-morrow and play a round of golf or something. Will you? Do!' Hesitancy, a shy look from beneath lowered lashes, half-reluctant acceptance. Later, a stolen kiss in the shrubbery, and——

'Come on, old gal!' said Artie Yarwood.

Yes: the Stroud-Smiths must get a little note of contrite apology—a very affectionate, charming little note, but quite definite.

Round a bend in the road, as they neared the Vicarage, came a man on horseback. He was a fine, well-made man, and sat his horse like a horseman. Philippa noticed, out of the tail of her eye, that he stared at her with interest, and then, as

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though suddenly recollecting his manners, looked quickly in the other direction.

'Who's that?' she asked. 'I wasn't quite sure whether I remembered him.'

'That's Mr. Cogbill—young Mr. John Cogbill, of Nutlands Farm. 'E's goin' ter marry Miss Charity.'

'Miss—my cousin, d'you mean?'

''Adn't you heard nothink about it, then, miss? I shud 'ave thought you'd 'ave known about it. They've bin keepin' company this ten or fifteen year, and now they're goin' ter be married. There'll be something like a kick-up that day, I reckon. She's a rare fav'rit with all the folks, is Miss Charity. Us chaps'll give the bells a bit of a doin'!'

'Oh, of course! How stupid of me! I remember now. Weren't they waiting for his father to give up the farm or something?'

'That's right, miss, but the old gentleman, yer see, 'e didn't mean givin' up as long as 'e could get about; though, o' course, Mister John's done the best part o' the work this ten year or more.'

'So old Mr. Cogbill's retiring at last, is he? I wonder my cousin didn't let me know.'

'Nobody knew nothink about it until yesterday, miss. Maybe that's the reason. Come on, old gal!'

Little Charity, that odd morsel, with the wisps of hair twisted into a knot at the back of her head and stumping about in thick-soled boots from the local cobbler's, going to be married to a fine young yeoman with a farm of his own! From a personal

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point of view, of course, a farmer was not nearly good enough—unless the farm happened to be in a very flourishing condition; and few English farmers, Philippa had heard, were in a flourishing condition. Still, a man of that appearance, who could sit a horse to perfection, and had probably been very decently educated, might surely have done better for himself than——

'What did you say the name of Mr. Cogbill's farm was?'

'Nutlands, miss. We shall be there directly. It's right opposite the Vicarage.'

'Oh, yes, yes. I remember. It's a very good farm, isn't it?'

Artie wagged his head to and fro in approbation of Nutlands.

'Reckoned one o' the best hereabout. Old Mr. Cogbill, yer see, was a shrewd, savin' man, and Mr. John's a downright good farmer in every way. Steady, yer know, miss, and yet up-ter-date an' enterprisin'. 'E's thought a lot of hereabout, miss, is Mister John Cogbill. There!' The ostler pointed eagerly with his whip. 'Yer can just see the chimneys o' Nutlands through the trees. All this is Mr. Cogbill's land, yer know, miss, as we be comin' through.'

'Indeed!'

Philippa looked sharply about her. She knew nothing whatever about farming, but the sense of space impressed her. She heard the hum of the mowers, and saw the carts, laden with hay, moving slowly across the fields. Lucky little Charity! How odd it would be if she, Philippa, were left on the shelf after all, whilst Charity, of whom she had never

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been able to think seriously as a bride, was looked up to as the mistress of Nutlands, and eventually, as her husband continued to prosper, became quite a personage in local society!

To speak plainly, Philippa was getting just a wee bit anxious.

'Come on, old gal!' said Artie Yarwood.

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CHAPTER IX

CHARITY, arriving not very long after Philippa, was met at the door by Mrs. Lilley. The faithful one looked vastly indignant. Her face was red, and, sure mark of agitation, a string of grey hair had escaped from beneath her cap and fallen across her forehead.

'Nice goin's on!' she hissed, in an angry stage-whisper. 'First of all there was the trunks to be got upstairs, and that fool Yarwood must needs fetch away a bit o' the wall-paper tryin' ter get round the bend! Then, no sooner am I back in me kitchen coolin' off a bit, when jingle-jangle goes 'er ladyship's bell, for all the world as though this was the Grand Hotel at Brummagem with sixty or seventy servants scampering about! "Yes, miss?" I called out from the foot of the stairs, but she makes believe not to hear me. Jingle-jangle, jingle-jangle goes the bell again—any one might 'ave thought the house was afire.

'So up I goes, in duty bound, and taps at the door of the spare room. "Come!" she says, and my blood boiled, talking to me as though I was a young kitchen-wench of sixteen. "Let me have some hot water, please," she says, without even looking up to see whether I was white or black. "Very well," I says, "but you 'll have to wait a bit,

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because I'm boiling the kettle for tea." "Oh," she says, "I wish to wash before tea." "Then you must wash in cold," I says, and comes downstairs to me kitchen.

'Hardly had I started toasting the pikelets when —jingle-jangle, jingle-jangle—goes the spare room bell again. I could hardly believe me ears—I couldn't indeed, Miss Charity. "I'll take no notice this time," I says to myself. "We may as well begin as we mean to go on," I says, and I went on toasting the pikelets. Jingle-jangle, jingle-jangle! You'd 'ave thought the bell was coming off the spring. So I puts down me pikelet and goes to the foot of the stairs.

'There was me ladyship, looking down at me over the banisters with a face as cross as two sticks; not that she was goin' ter frighten *me*! "Am I to have that hot water or am I not?" she says. "When I've made the tea, miss," I says, keeping me temper, "I'll put some more on for you. We've only the one fire," I says, "and the boiler's got a hole in it." "This is disgraceful!" she says, stamping her foot, "and the moment Miss Charity comes in I shall report you for impertinence." "Hoity-toity!" I says, and went into the kitchen and slammed the door. I couldn't have helped it, Miss Charity, not if you and yer Pa was to pack me out of the house the next minute. And after all the time I've been in service here to be spoke to as if I—as if——'

At this point, Mrs. Lilley, whom Charity had gently coaxed into the kitchen again as she talked, sat down heavily on a Windsor chair and burst into tears.

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'Never mind,' said Charity, putting her arm tenderly about the old woman's shaking shoulders. 'It's all a mistake, Mrs. Lilley. Miss Secretan doesn't understand your position here. It's five years since she met you, you know, and she goes to so many places that I expect she's forgotten you. I shall explain to her.'

'It isn't,' sobbed Mrs. Lilley, dabbing at her eyes with one hand and trying to toast the unfortunate pikelet with the other, 'as though I wasn't one to make people as comfortable as I can. But I can't do imp—improbabilities, and it wasn't my fault as the boi—boiler had a hole in it!'

'Of course not. Now, you're not to worry any more about it. And when Miss Secretan comes downstairs, just pretend that the whole incident never occurred; will you?'

'I will if you ask me to, Miss Charity, but I don't take to her, and that's flat. Making you walk across the fields all by yourself just because she must have her trunks overnight! I'd "trunk" 'er if I had the chance!' And Mrs. Lilley gave the toasting-fork such a savage shake that a pikelet fell into the ash-pan.

'There!" said Charity, laughing. 'That's what comes of being revengeful.'

'I'll take care as *she* gets that one!' retorted Mrs. Lilley.

Charity, opening the door of the spare room, was met by the wrathful Philippa.

'I've never been so insulted in my life! That old cook of yours, or whatever she is, absolutely refused to let me have any warm water! Did you ever hear such impertinence! If you or Uncle

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Walter had been at home, she wouldn't have dared to speak to me as she did. Actually told me I must wash in cold, and made some excuse about the boiler having a hole in it. I hope you'll speak to her very sharply, Charity.'

'I've already spoken to her, and she's sorry she lost her temper. You see, Philippa, Mrs. Lilley is our only servant, she has been with us a great many years, and we treat her with every consideration. It's my fault; I ought to have warned you.'

'Does that mean that I'm to put up with her rudeness all the time I'm here?'

'There won't be any rudeness,' said Charity, very quietly. 'Is there anything I can do for you? Have you everything you want?'

Philippa was rather taken aback by the note of finality in her cousin's tone. For one second, she came very near to feeling snubbed. The next, she dismissed the idea as preposterous, and fell to congratulating Charity, with plenty of pats and kisses, on her engagement.

'You sly little thing! Keeping a great, big, lovely piece of news like that all to yourself! But it's just like you, you quaint, funny little darling! And I'm so glad, Charity; you can't think how glad I am! Of course, you're much too good for him, even though he is so handsome and so well-off! No man in the world could be good enough for this dear little cousin of mine! Now, do tell me all about it while I unpack!'

Charity's tender heart was touched. There were tears of gratitude in her eyes as she said, turning towards the window, 'Oh, there's not time now,

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dear. Daddy will be waiting tea. I heard him come in. By the way, how did you hear?'

'Why, the man who drove me from the station told me. We met Mr. Cogbill riding, and I asked who he was, and then it all came out. Oh, Charity, you ought to have heard the nice things the driver said about you! There was nobody in all the world like Miss Charity, and they're going to have such a day when you're married, and give the bells such a doing, and——'

'Tea!' interrupted Charity, as she slipped out of the room. Philippa, descending the stairs a minute later, flattered herself that she would soon become popular in Littleworth Vicarage, even though the beginning had not been very auspicious.

She made herself extremely charming to Mr. Couchman, calling him 'Uncle Walter' as often as possible, complimenting him upon his youthful appearance, going into raptures over the garden, drawing him out about the lawn, and holding up two pretty hands in sheer amazement when he told her how many thousands of barrow-loads of earth he had filled, and wheeled, and emptied since her previous visit. The Vicar, highly delighted, ran into his study, rummaged in a drawer until he found the book he required, bore it back in triumph to the tea-table, and made a rapid calculation on paper in order that he might give his visitor the precise figures.

'Fancy!' exclaimed Philippa. 'Marvellous! Isn't it wonderful, Charity! Really, Uncle Walter, you ought to be photographed for the papers! What extraordinary perseverance! No,

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thanks, Charity, darling: no more tea. I'm simply dying to go round the garden with Uncle Walter. Oh, well, just half-a-cup, then, and, if I must, one of those dear little cakes with pink sugar on top. Did you make them yourself? You clever person! How I envy you, being able to do so many things and do them all so perfectly splendidly!'

As Charity kissed her father good-night, he whispered: 'Well, have you changed your mind about your cousin?'

'Oh, yes,' said Charity. 'She's much nicer than I expected. She seems quite different.'

'A charming girl, and really a clever conversationalist. We shall miss her when she goes.'

Charity agreed; but she did not know of the severe trial that was in store for her that very night. Going into Philippa's room, she found her cousin standing on a chair, trying to shut the window.

'Oh, dear,' cried Philippa, 'I'm so glad you've come at last! I've been trying to shut this horrid window for the last five minutes, and I can't move it. I didn't dare ring for Mrs. Lilley after my experience this afternoon.'

'But do you really want it shut? It's a beautifully mild night, you know.'

'I can't help that, my dear. I should be scared to death in this lonely house sleeping with the window open. You don't know how nervous I am at night.'

'But it's very bad for you to have the window

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shut,' Charity protested, falling easily into her cousin's trap.

'Well,' suggested Philippa, looking very rueful and helpless, 'will you sleep with me?'

Poor Charity! She had been looking forward so to the quiet hour in her own dear room. She had so much to tell the 'Confidence-Book.' For example, whilst Philippa was going round the garden with her uncle, Charity had ventured to slip across to Nutlands, and had found John, as before, all among the ricks. And, in obedience to his command, she had kissed him. True, it was not a very big kiss. John declared that he could hardly feel it, and it was only on his chin. Yet the fact remained that she, Charity, had kissed this great fellow, soon to be her husband. What a rough, stubbly chin he had! She tingled and blushed as she thought of it, and the soft gleam in her eyes showed that a woman's birthright of beauty had not, after all, been wholly withheld from little Charity. . . .

Can you wonder that she was longing to be at her window, listening for the slow, solemn chimes of the old clock, and thinking, thinking, thinking of HIM? And can you wonder that she hesitated perceptibly when she was asked to sacrifice all this in order that Philippa might not feel nervous? Besides, if she consented now, she would have to consent every night until her cousin's visit came to an end!

'Oh, pray don't, if you'd rather not!'

Philippa, angry and reproachful, jumped off the chair and stalked across to the dressing-table.

'I—er—if you really think you'll be——'

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'Oh, never mind! Never mind about me! I can stay awake all night and read! I wouldn't inconvenience you for worlds!'

Charity rose, and walked to the door.

'Good-night!' Philippa's tone was charged with the bitterest irony. 'I hope you'll sleep well, in spite of the fact that your guest is lying awake, trembling at every sound!'

'I'm coming back,' said Charity quietly.

'Oh, you darling!' Her cousin darted at her with outstretched arms. 'It's most awfully sweet of you—it is really! You don't really mind very much, do you?'

'Of course not.'

'Don't be long, then. We'll have such a splendid gossip. I'm dying to hear all about your beloved!'

The prospect of a gossip with Philippa about John did not render the plan any more enticing, but Charity was in for it now, and must put the best possible face on the matter. She undressed as quickly as she could in order to snatch a few minutes with the 'Confidence-Book.' Then, having kissed the photograph of John on horseback, and the photograph of John aged two, and heard the old clock tell the hour of eleven, she returned to the spare room.

Philippa, on beholding Charity arrayed for the night, gave a capital imitation of childish glee.

'You adorable thing! I simply love you with your hair tied back like that! Do come here; I must see how you'd look as a little nun.' She twisted a towel about Charity's head, drawing it tightly across the forehead and concealing every

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wisp of hair. 'Oh, lovely! Look at yourself in the glass! Don't you think you'd have made a dear little nun? Only then you'd have had to give up your beautiful lover, and that wouldn't suit Charity at all, would it? Jump into bed and talk to me while I massage my face.'

Charity watched Philippa's toilet with considerable interest. It was wonderful to her that anybody should take such a vast amount of trouble to look nice. Her own dressing-table was quite innocent of creams, and powders, and salves. She could hardly help laughing when she saw Philippa seriously and very carefully combing out a long piece of somebody else's hair.

'It's all very well,' explained Philippa, 'for girls who go to bed early, and get up early, and live in the country all the year round, and lead thoroughly healthy lives. But when one is constantly compelled to sit up till two and three in the morning playing bridge, and all that sort of thing, one has to resort to all sorts of devices to preserve anything remotely resembling a complexion. I'd give the world to have your lovely clear skin, Charity. But tell me about John. I suppose you're most desperately happy about it all, aren't you?'

'Oh, yes, very happy,' said Charity.

'And it was actually only yesterday that he proposed! How calmly you take it! I should be all in a whirl. Where was it? What time was it? How did it happen? Do tell me—or would you rather not?'

'I'm afraid there's not very much to tell.'

'Oh, but it's most frightfully interesting—every

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little, tiny thing. I can imagine you strolling through the wood together, just after sunset, listening to the nightingales. Was it like that at all?'

'Oh, no,' said Charity. 'We were——' She stopped, dreading Philippa's laughter.

'Yes, yes! Go on! Don't tantalise me! Where were you?'

'We were—in the rickyard.'

'Oh, but how perfectly sweet! Just like a play! Was it morning, afternoon, or evening? Do say it was evening! Satisfy my romantic soul!'

'It was about six o'clock.'

'She gives me the very hour!' cried Philippa. 'What a practical little Charity it is! Well, well! Six o'clock in the rickyard, and you and John all alone among the friendly ricks. Is that right? You see, I have to drag it out of you! It isn't the least bit fair!'

'We weren't quite alone.'

Philippa dropped the end of the 'switch' in her amazement.

'Not alone? D'you mean to tell me that he proposed to you in the presence of somebody else?'

Charity fussed with the sheet to hide her embarrassment. Her cousin's inquisitive persistence was straining her patience to the utmost. But Charity was of so gentle a nature that she could not bear to be on bad terms with anybody in the world, and Philippa had already shown a disposition to quarrel if she were thwarted.

'You see, it wasn't quite like an ordinary proposal.'

'I should think not, indeed! But who was the third person? This is the most interesting thing I ever heard.'

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'Well, old Mrs. Cogbill was there.'

'His mother?'

'Yes. You see—It's rather difficult to explain.'

'Oh, but do try, Charity.' Philippa lit a cigarette and plumped herself down on the bed. 'You wouldn't be so mean as to leave off now!'

'Well, John, you see, is extremely shy.'

'It doesn't sound like it. A man who can propose to a girl before a third person!'

'You don't understand, I'm afraid. John's the sort of man who would put off a thing like that as long as possible if somebody didn't——'

Philippa, suddenly enlightened, sat up very straight.

'You don't mean to tell me that his mother had to bring him up to the scratch?'

'I suppose,' Charity admitted, feeling that everything, somehow or other, was going wrong, 'that's what it came to. Of course——'

Any explanation that she might have offered was cut short by a peal of laughter from Philippa.

'Oh,' gurgled Philippa, 'how perfectly lovely! Poor John! I can just imagine the scene! And how truly terrible for *you*, my poor child! I think I should have been inclined to tell him that a man who hadn't the pluck to propose for himself didn't deserve to be married at all.'

'But we didn't really give him time,' protested Charity. 'I mean to say, it was all Mrs. Cogbill's fault. She insisted on getting everything settled then and there. As a matter of fact, she had been talking to me for some time when we were by ourselves as though John and I were already formally engaged. And of course, when she dragged me

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out, I felt as though I wanted the earth to open and swallow me up. But Mrs. Cogbill's so determined. There was nothing to be done but submit. I 'm afraid you 'll think me very silly and weak.'

'Oh, no, dear.' Philippa's manner had changed. She seemed abstracted, as though thinking something out.

'I can quite imagine how awful you felt,' she said presently. Through the smoke of her cigarette, she was watching Charity intently.

'Oh, yes! It was dreadful!'

'And it couldn't have been particularly pleasant for poor John.'

'No. I felt so sorry for him!'

'It was lucky that he really *was* in love with you. I mean to say'—here Philippa crossed to the fender and flicked the ash from her cigarette—'what a dreadfully awkward situation for a man to be in if, for some reason or another, he had not meant to propose.'

'Dreadful,' said Charity sleepily. She turned on her side as a gentle hint that the conversation was nearly over.

Philippa, however, was not to be baulked.

'Personally,' she said, 'if a man proposed to me under conditions of that sort, I should feel rather uneasy about accepting him, however much I loved him.'

Charity opened her eyes again. 'Of course, unless you were quite certain.'

'Certain of what?'

'Why, that he loved you and wanted you to marry him.'

Philippa raised her eyebrows. 'Men are odd

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creatures,' she said. 'It's quite a mistake to suppose that the age of chivalry is dead.'

Charity wondered vaguely what this had to do with the subject in hand. She turned her head on the pillow to look at her cousin. Philippa replied with a look that said as plainly as possible, 'I would spare you if I could, but, much as I love you, I think I ought to warn you.' Charity, interpreting the expression aright, was conscious of a sickly little chill at her heart.

'What do you mean?' she said, lying very still.

Philippa threw the end of the cigarette into the fender. Then she returned to the bed, leaned over it, put her arms about her cousin, and kissed her.

'Nothing, dear. You're tired. Go to sleep. We can talk all this over again in the morning.'

'I don't understand. Are you trying to—to frighten me?'

'Charity, dearest! As if I would!'

'Well, then, why do you look so curious and speak to me like that? You were laughing a few minutes ago, and now you're quite serious. You *are* frightening me, whether you're trying to or not. If you have anything to say, I wish you'd say it right out. What is it?'

'Perhaps,' said Philippa, 'I'm quite wrong. Oh, I hope I am, Charity!'

Charity raised herself on her elbow. She had never mastered the art of concealing her feelings, and the expression on her face, as her cousin's meaning gradually dawned upon her, was pitiful to see.

'Wrong about what?' Her voice was rather husky, and she cleared her throat. 'D'you mean

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that you think that John—that John wouldn't have——'

'Don't!' pleaded Philippa. 'Don't say it, Charity! Forget about it!'

'Then you do mean that. You think that John may not really love me, and that he might never have proposed at all if his mother had not made him. Oh!'

The involuntary little moan of anguish with which the brave speech ended struck no answering chord in the heart of Philippa.

'I oughtn't to have said anything about it. I shouldn't have, you know, only you dragged it out of me.'

'I'm glad I did. How awful it would have been if I had not found it out until——'

She laughed. She had either to laugh or cry, and she would not cry before Philippa. Besides, it was all rather comical, in a dull, heavy kind of way. Her wonderful dream of happiness had lasted just a little more than twenty-four hours. Just twenty-four hours ago, she was writing in the 'Confidence-Book' that—— And now it was all over, and she was staring at Philippa's silly-looking 'switch.' Charity laughed again. She could see clearly now what a little fool she had been to think that anybody should——

'I can't bear to hear you laugh like that,' said Philippa, who was rather alarmed at the result of her own handiwork.

'But it's funny!' said Charity. 'Don't you see how funny it is. Poor John being forced to ask me to marry him, when all the time, very likely, he wants to marry somebody else! Poor, dear old

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John! What a shame!' And Charity, her small frame shaken with hysterical laughter, buried her face in the pillow.

Philippa began to be afraid that Mr. Couchman or Mrs. Lilley would overhear her, and come to the door to make inquiries. Seating herself again upon the bed, she took Charity by the shoulder.

'Control yourself,' she said, sharply. 'You're getting hysterical, and all about nothing. D'you hear me?'

'All right,' gasped Charity. 'I—I shall be better in a minute, only——'

'Wipe your face with this,' commanded Philippa, handing her the cold, wet sponge. 'That's right. Here's the towel. Now lie down, and don't bother your head any more about my silly fancies until the morning.'

But Charity, feeling that she must either talk or think, preferred the former.

'What a little fool you must think me,' she said. 'That's the worst of spending nearly the whole of one's life in a tiny country village. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you, Philippa.'

'You ought to hate me.'

'For opening my eyes before it was too late?'

Philippa put out the lamp and got into bed. She had a suggestion to make that seemed to demand darkness.

'It is very foolish of you,' she began, snuggling down by her cousin in the most affectionate manner, 'to take it for granted that I am right. I hope to goodness you won't write to John to-morrow breaking it off, or anything idiotic of that kind.'

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This, of course, was the very plan that Charity had in mind. And Philippa guessed that she had it in mind. What would be the next step? Why, John, very perplexed and more in love, perhaps, than ever, would stride across the lane and—— Oh, no; that would not suit Miss Philippa at all. . . . So her mind ran, although, for very conscience sake, she would not allow herself to think in words.

'What else can I do?'

'Why, make sure, of course!'

'But how? If I asked him outright, you don't suppose he'd tell me the blunt truth, do you? How could he?'

'I think I know what I should do,' said Philippa.

'Oh, what? Do tell me! You're so clever, and I'm such a little duffer at these things.'

'Well, I should get somebody else to find out. Not directly, of course, but indirectly. I should get somebody who was tactful, and sympathetic, and had some knowledge of character, to talk to him about you, and, as it were, sound him. Don't you think that would be a good plan?'

'Perhaps it would,' said Charity, doubtfully. 'But the person might make a mistake, especially if they were very fond of me. They would unconsciously say nice things about me, and then John would have to agree, and that would make them think that he loved me, after all.'

'I agree with you that a *man* might make a mistake of that kind—your father, for instance. No, I should not like to intrust such a delicate mission to a man.'

'What a pity, Philippa, that *you* don't know

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him. I suppose you hardly remember him at all, do you?'

'Only vaguely, I'm afraid, although, for that matter, it oughtn't to take one long to get to understand him.'

'Then——'

'No. Wait a minute.' She slipped a cousinly arm round Charity's waist. 'Don't you see, darling, how awful it would be for me if—well, if it turned out that there was any ground at all for our suspicions? It would kill me to have to tell you.'

'You needn't be afraid that I should take it badly, or make a scene. Just see how quietly I'm talking about it now. And it's so awful not to know for certain—not to be absolutely sure. And there's nobody to help me in this but you, Philippa. Won't you, please, help me?'

'Well, if I ought to—if it's my duty——'

'I should be so grateful to you.' Charity found her cousin's hand and gave it a little squeeze. 'You'd do it so nicely. You're so clever and tactful. I'll—I'll introduce you to-morrow.'

Almost poor Charity broke down as she mentioned the introduction. It was such a different introduction to which she had proudly looked forward.

'Not to-morrow. Better wait a day or two until it comes about naturally.'

'Very well, only the suspense will be rather trying.'

'Poor little Charity!' Philippa kissed her goodnight. 'Now go to sleep; and you're not to have a single bad dream. Promise!'

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'I never have bad dreams,' said Charity, simply.

'That's right.' And Philippa, rolling over to her own side of the bed, spoke no more.

Charity waited patiently until she was sure that her cousin was fast asleep. Then she slipped out of bed, and stole across to the window.

From this side of the house she could see Nutlands Farm—the sheds, and the ricks, and the gables of the house poking up through a gap in the trees. 'My heart would break if he ever left off loving me, because he is everything to me now—just *all* my life.' Would it break her heart? Was it already broken? 'I pray God that he will watch over you, and bless you, and never let you be unhappy, and never, *never*, NEVER let you regret. . . .'

Only twenty-four hours since she had written those words, and now——!

. . . The sheds, and the ricks, and the gables disappeared, for Charity's eyes were blinded with a sudden rush of tears. She sank to the bare floor, her head against the sill. . . .

Boom! Boom! Boom! The clock in the valley was telling his old, old tale.

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CHAPTER X

EAGERLY expectant Littleworth had not long to wait, as it happened, for a thoroughly good view of the new lord of Ullenhall Castle. The very morning after the events recorded in the last chapter, Mr. James T. Ackrill's magnificent touring motor-car, with Mr. James T. Ackrill himself at the wheel, ran over a hen almost immediately opposite the 'King's Arms.' The village street was quite deserted, and it is possible that, under any other circumstances, Mr. Ackrill would have proceeded, airily and happily enough, upon his dusty way. But Littleworth lay almost in the very shadow of the Castle. Littleworth, moreover, was within the constituency that Mr. Ackrill hoped to make his own. Littleworth, in short, could not be too quickly won over.

Mr. Ackrill's chauffeur jumped out of the car, and ran back to pick up the body of the hen. Mr. Ackrill, having stopped his engine, descended more heavily. He was a short, stout man, with small quick eyes and a ponderous manner. He was wearing a fur coat and smoking a cigar. He always smoked a cigar when driving himself. He explained that it steadied his nerves. His enemies, of whom, being a shrewd, merciless, and fairly unscrupulous man of business, he had many, said

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that he smoked because he was afraid of being mistaken for his own chauffeur.

The hen was quite dead. The chauffeur grinned as he conveyed the information. To the town-dweller, there is always something comic in the sudden suspension of tame life.

'We must pay for it,' said Mr. Ackrill, nobly.

At that moment, a third figure appeared on the scene. This was Crazy Jim. He had seen the motor-car from the window of his mother's cottage, and had come out to touch it.

'Hi!' called Mr. Ackrill, waving a gloved hand.

The lanky simpleton approached cautiously.

'D'you know whom this hen belongs to?' asked Mr. Ackrill. (The chauffeur was looking Crazy Jim up and down much as a child stares on seeing, for the first time, a giraffe.)

The simpleton took the bird in his hands and looked into its face.

''Er be dead,' he said brightly.

'We know that,' replied Mr. Ackrill. 'I had the misfortune to run over it with my car just now. We want to find the owner and pay for it. Do you recognise the hen?'

Crazy Jim turned the carcass over and over, ruffling the feathers as though looking for a trade-mark. Then he held it at arm's length and surveyed it, after the manner of a painter, with half-closed eyes. Finally, he set it down in the roadway and drew back a pace.

'*I* never done it,' he said.

'Nobody said you did,' retorted Mr. Ackrill. 'I told you that I ran over it, accidentally. Don't you know anybody about here that keeps hens?'

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The simpleton grinned. 'All on us does.'

The lord of Ullenhall Castle was just about to lose his temper when the church clock struck twelve. On the last stroke, the door of the little village school was flung back with a crash, and the children came dashing out into the street.

'Ooo! A moter! A moter!' they screamed, delightedly, and forthwith made a cheerful ring round the car, Mr. Ackrill, the chauffeur, and Crazy Jim.

Mr. Ackrill, with the townsman's horror of a gathering crowd, bade them 'run away,' but the children seemed unwilling to take him seriously. At any rate, they backed about a yard and then drew in again.

''E's killed a chicken!' cried a boy.

'What a shame!' murmured a girl, impulsively, and then hid herself behind a companion.

Mr. Ackrill began to feel embarrassed. There are few men, outside schoolmasters and clergymen, who can face a crowd of children and remain serene.

'It was an accident,' he explained again. 'If any of you children can tell me to whom it belongs, I should like to pay for it.'

'Looks like one o' ourn,' said a small boy with sharp features.

'I knows it ain't, then,' said another boy promptly. 'You ain't got none like that, 'Arry Bone'ill! Yers be all brown 'uns!'

'I knows they ain't, then!'

'I knows they be!'

Whereupon the small boy with sharp features, to the delight of the chauffeur, struck his friend a

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violent blow in the stomach, and then ran like mad for home.

'This is absurd,' said Mr. Ackrill. 'Go and ask at the inn, Hopkins.'

Hopkins was still in the 'King's Arms,' submitting the corpse to the expert examination of the inn-keeper's wife and Mr. Artie Yarwood, when Mr. Couchman appeared in the distance, trudging stoutly, and striking the ground, as though he had a bitter grudge against it, with his thick staff.

'Who's this?' asked Mr. Ackrill of one of the elder girls.

'Parson!' shouted all the children in chorus.

'All right, all right,' said Mr. Ackrill, testily.

'Now, children,' called Mr. Couchman, while he was yet a dozen yards away, 'take care you don't get run over!'

This was intended as a little pleasantry, but Mr. Ackrill, that guilty one, feared that he had already gained himself a local reputation as a slaughterer. Pushing his way through the ring of children, therefore, he approached Mr. Couchman and raised his cap.

'How do you do, sir?' he said, as amiably as he could.

'Good-day,' returned the Vicar, lifting his wide-awake. 'No accident, I trust?'

'A very slight one. I had the misfortune to run over a hen, and my man is now inquiring for the owner in order that we may pay for the damage.'

'Dear, dear!' said the Vicar, absent-mindedly. In his desire to make himself agreeable to the stranger, he had rather missed the gist of the story.

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'Are you the Rector here?' asked Mr. Ackrill.

'I am the Vicar.'

'I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Ackrill.'

'Indeed? Then you are the gentleman we are to welcome as the new owner of Ullenhall Castle?'

The note of respect in the Vicar's voice fully compensated Mr. Ackrill for the bother over the dead hen.

'Yes,' he said, carelessly. 'At least, I've taken it for a term of years, you know, and I hope to be there a good deal, on and off. The Castle is not in your diocese, is it?'

'No.' Mr. Couchman smiled but slightly at the little joke. He did not quite approve of jocular lay use of ecclesiastical terms. 'This is my parish —Littleworth. Ullenhall adjoins it; but we often had the pleasure of seeing the late owner of the Castle, and the members of his household, in our little church.'

'Ah.' Mr. Ackrill did not commit himself further. He was prepared to do a certain amount of church-going, with a view to his candidature, but that was no reason why he should pledge himself to attend all the churches in the neighbourhood.

The chauffeur came out of the inn, accompanied by Mr. Yarwood. Artie was of opinion that the chicken had strayed from Nutlands Farm, and, since Mr. Ackrill was anxious to apologise and settle up without delay, the Vicar offered to show him the way to the farm.

'Jump in, then,' said the draper, importantly. And Mr. Couchman, amid the giggles of the chil-

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dren, jumped in and was whirled away in a cloud of dust.

His delight in the swift, easy movement was unbounded. He plied Mr. Ackrill with a thousand questions. What was the greatest speed obtainable? In what space was it possible to bring the car to a standstill? Was it not a fact that these cars were very expensive to maintain? Had Mr. Ackrill ever been in a serious accident? Did he ever indulge in racing? Was it not extremely difficult to drive through the dense traffic in Birmingham? Together with many more queries of a similar nature, to all of which Mr. Ackrill returned brief but patient answers, at the same time telling himself that it would be easy enough, when the necessity arose, to make good use of this simple old fool.

The interview with John Cogbill the younger was not quite so satisfactory. They met him coming out of a side gate. He was in shirt-sleeves.

'Stop! Stop!' cried the Vicar, giving the chauffeur a vigorous nudge between the shoulder-blades. 'This is Mr. Cogbill! Stop! Woa!'

They pulled up, and Mr. Ackrill signalled to John to approach. John, smiling at the unexpected sight of the Vicar in the motor-car, sauntered nearer.

Noting the farmer's size, Mr. Ackrill decided to conduct the negotiations from the car. He hated tall men, especially when he found himself compelled to stand next to them. It was well known in the trade that he would not give employment to a tall man if he could get a short man to do

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the work. His staff, in consequence, was known as 'Ackrill's Midgets.'

Besides, it was not as though the man were a gentleman-farmer. Mr. Ackrill flattered himself that he could tell a gentleman-farmer when he saw one. They always went about on horseback, and wore bowler hats. This lump of a chap in the shirt-sleeves was certainly in a very small way of business. He must be treated with some hauteur. Moreover, if the sight of a gentleman in a fur coat and a motor-car excited his natural cupidity, he would find that he had to deal with somebody of no less commercial shrewdness than Mr. James T. Ackrill, of Ackrill House, Corporation Street.

The Vicar performed the ceremony of introduction.

'Day,' said Mr. Ackrill.

'Do,' said John.

'Do you keep hens, my man?'

'Oh, yes,' said John, rather astonished, but quite ready for a deal.

'Any particular kind?'

John mentioned various breeds.

'Yes, yes. But what colours would they be?'

The farmer smiled. 'Brown, black, white, grey.' It reminded him of a game that he and Charity used to play in earlier days called, 'Here comes an old soldier from Botany Bay.'

'You're sure you have some grey ones?'

'Had last night, anyway.'

'Ah! Any of them missing this morning?'

'Can't say. Haven't counted 'em.'

'Would one of them be likely to get as far as the village?'

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'Shouldn't think so.'

Mr. Ackrill, making a sudden dive, confronted the witness with the corpse.

'D'you recognise that hen?'

'Couldn't say for certain; but we've got some like that.'

'Oh, you have, have you?'

'I said we had.'

The Vicar began to feel uneasy. He was afraid that John might lose his temper and offend this all-powerful little fellow in the fur coat.

'All right, all right. I only wanted to make sure. Now, I had the misfortune to run over this hen in the village and kill it. It was not my fault. I sounded the horn several times. Didn't I, Hopkins?'

Hopkins testified to the foolhardiness of the hen.

'None the less, I am prepared to pay the damage. If you feel pretty sure that this is your hen, name your price. On the other hand, if you have any doubts on the subject, I'll leave the money with our good friend here until the matter is cleared up.'

John took the hen and felt it to see whether it was young and plump or old and lean.

'Three shillings,' he said, laconically.

His off-hand manner was not pleasing to Mr. Ackrill. He was not accustomed to such treatment in his shop, and he did not see why he should put up with it from a country bumpkin in shirt-sleeves.

'*How* much?' he replied, sharply.

'I said three shillings.'

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'Then I doubt whether it's worth a penny more than half-a-crown.'

'The fowl,' intervened the Vicar, pacifically, 'is not dressed for table, John.'

'You mustn't think,' added Mr. Ackrill, 'that because I come from a town, I know nothing about the prices of country produce. I'm a business man, let me remind you, and such things come to me by instinct.'

'You mean,' said John, looking the little draper very steadily in the eye, 'that you don't believe me?'

'I don't say that at all. But I think you're trying to make the most of the opportunity.'

'You're not the only business man, you know.'

'Certainly not. That's a fair point. We're both business men, and we wish to settle this little affair in a business-like manner. I offer you two-and ninepence for the hen.'

'Three shillings,' said John.

'Suppose I refuse?'

'You killed the chicken, didn't you?'

'I've already admitted it.'

'Then you must pay for it.'

Mr. Ackrill reflected. Nothing hurt him more than being beaten over a deal, and it was especially galling that he should have placed himself at the mercy, as it were, of this ill-mannered yokel. But it was one of his commonest boasts that he was a 'good waiter,' by which he meant that he would store up a grudge for years in order to 'get his own back' with generous interest. After all, he could better afford to have this fellow bragging that he had 'bested Ackrill' than begin his reign

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with the suspicion of meanness against him. An opportunity would doubtless arise for him to show the slow-witted farmer which was the better man of the two.

'Very well,' he said, with a nasty little laugh. 'You shall have your extra threepence to drink my health with.'

Mr. Couchman, upon whom the insult was not lost, marvelled greatly that John took it so quietly. He had been known to throw a man over a hedge for less than that.

The draper slowly drew off an enormous glove, dived, not without difficulty, into a tight pocket, and produced the three shillings.

'Not a bad morning's work for you,' he said. 'I presume I am entitled to keep the bird. Here's your money.'

'You can give it to the Vicar for the poor-box,' said John. 'Morning, Mr. Couchman.' And he walked away.

Thus the lord of Ullenhall Castle came to Littleworth. And thus he discovered, rather to his dismay, that there are still people in England with whom a little breeding and courtesy will go a great deal further than a pile of money.

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CHAPTER XI

MR. ACKRILL accepted Mr. Couchman's invitation to leave the car in the lane for a few minutes and take a stroll round the garden of the Vicarage.

A charming picture met the eyes of the two men as they rounded the corner of the house. In the shade cast by an angle of the wall, against an idyllic background of roses and clematis, a pretty girl was reclining in a deck-chair. The pale blue of her frock blended perfectly with the richer tint of the clematis, and her complexion looked as creamy and delicate as the fairest of the roses. She wore no hat. Her hair was parted in the centre and waved lightly across her temples. Slim little shoes and a glimpse of openwork stocking lent finish and piquancy to the whole.

Philippa was so intent upon her novel that she had not the slightest idea, of course, that her solitude was about to be disturbed. If Mrs. Lilley ever tells you that Philippa scurried across to the hedge and peeped eagerly through it the very moment she heard the sound of the motor-car, that she listened to the conversation until she was sure of the identity of the owner of the car, that she then dashed upstairs to powder her nose and change her shoes and hold her hands above her head until the blood ran out of them, that within

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five minutes she had selected the ideal position for the deck-chair and the one cushion from the drawing-room that would 'go' with her costume and the clematis, and that, for all her pretty absorption and lack of self-consciousness, she was still panting from the effects of her helter-skelter when the Vicar and Mr. Ackrill first discovered her—if, I say, Mrs. Lilley should ever ask you to believe these things of the guileless Philippa, pray remember that Mrs. Lilley had considered herself grossly insulted the previous day, and that it was one of her boasts that 'first depressions' invariably proved correct in the long-run.

Mr. Couchman stole playfully to the back of Philippa's chair, and, with a sudden movement, put his hands over his niece's eyes. Philippa gave a little shriek. Not a scream, or a yell, or a shout, or anything ugly of that kind, but a pretty, musical, feminine, captivating little shriek. Then, placing her own small hands upon the Vicar's wrists, she cried gaily: 'Uncle!'

'Right you are!' Mr. Couchman roared with laughter. 'And I've brought somebody else to see you. Mr. Ackrill, allow me to introduce you to my niece, Miss Philippa Secretan.'

'Don't move!' begged the lord of the Castle. 'I wouldn't spoil the picture for any money in the world. You ought to get somebody to paint you just as you are, Miss Secretan.'

Philippa laughed. She had a fresh, girlish laugh, with a little bit of devil in it. Mr. Ackrill felt glad to be there.

'What—in this old rag of a dress and all untidy and anyhow? It's too bad of you, Uncle Walter,

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to spring visitors upon one in the morning, and take one by surprise!'

'No amount of preparation could have improved your present appearance, I assure you.'

Mr. Ackrill bowed as he spoke. He had taken off his cap and goggles, but was still wearing the fur coat. He looked gross, and dusty, and prosperous, and rather oily. As he smirked at Philippa, an artist with an ironical turn of mind might have posed them for a modern interpretation of Pluto and Ceres.

'Isn't that rather a doubtful compliment?'

The draper laughed. He was delighted with the girl's wit.

'I suppose you could take it two ways if you liked.'

'Mr. Ackrill is to be our neighbour at Ullenhall Castle, you know, Philippa.'

'Really?' Business of ingenuous girl suddenly realising importance of visitor. 'Then you're the wonderful person we're all talking and thinking about, Mr. Ackrill!'

'Am I?' Ackrill steeped in pleasant glow, not wholly attributable to fur coat. 'You mustn't chaff me, Miss Secretan.'

'But I'm not, I assure you! The first thing that I heard on my arrival here yesterday was of the new owner of the Castle, and the wonderful improvements he was making, and what grand doings there were to be at the Castle. Isn't that true, Uncle? Isn't Mr. Ackrill all the gossip?'

'Naturally,' Mr. Couchman replied. 'It's dismal to have a great place like that shut up. Half the

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life seems to have gone out of the neighbourhood when the Castle is standing empty.'

'Well,' said the new lord, 'we must see what we can do to wake things up a bit. I believe they've got a few rooms ready for me, and so I hope to be in residence there next week. By the way, why not let me run you over now and have a look round, Miss Secretan?'

Philippa's heart leapt at the suggestion. But she demurred outwardly. There would scarcely be time to get back before luncheon, and her cousin might need her, and so on.

Mr. Ackrill found little difficulty in sweeping aside these trivial objections. They could be there in ten minutes in the car, and his man should drive her back in plenty of time for luncheon—that was to say, unless she would give him the pleasure of lunching at the Castle. As for the cousin, why shouldn't she come too?

The Vicar bade them wait a moment, and ran into the house, calling for Charity. He found her dusting the drawing-room, her head swathed in an old cloth.

'Mr. Ackrill's here! explained Mr. Couchman, excitedly. 'I met him in the village, and he drove me up in his motor-car. Such an affable man! He's talking to Philippa in the garden, and he wants you both to go over to the Castle with him and have lunch. Be quick and make yourself tidy, my dear.'

Charity looked white and fagged. There were unusual dark shadows beneath her eyes; but the Vicar, coming in from the bright sunlight, did not notice them.

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'Oh, I can't, daddy!'

'But why not? You know how important it is that we should get to know him intimately, and this informal invitation seems such a good beginning. Philippa would like to go, I'm sure.'

'There's no reason why Philippa shouldn't go, although I suppose she ought not to stay to lunch by herself. Why don't you go, daddy?'

'I can't. I'm far too busy.' (This was one of the Vicar's charming little delusions. Two visits in the village and a couple of postcards to write, all on the same afternoon, invariably made him feel that he was leading the strenuous life.) 'Besides, he didn't ask me.'

'Well, I'm very sorry, daddy, but I'd much rather not go. I don't feel quite up to the mark, for one thing, and it would take me at least half an hour to change and get ready. Let Philippa go alone, if she will.'

'Very well, then, but she had better be back in time for lunch, I think.'

The arrangement was perfectly satisfactory to Philippa, who flattered herself that she could twist this 'vulgar old beast' round her little finger so soon as she had him all to herself, and to Mr. Ackrill, who felt, as he flirted in elephantine fashion with the pretty girl at his side, that he was already in a very fair way to become a member of the Smart Set.

Philippa was assiduous in her praise of the car and of Mr. Ackrill's driving. He told her how much he had paid for it, and how much he had paid for the fittings, and the prices and horse-power of his other cars, and the total amount per

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week, per month, and per annum of his petrol bill, and the wages of his two chauffeurs. And Philippa, as the figures were unfolded, cried 'Fancy!' or 'No!' or 'Oh!' or 'Heavens!' as the case demanded, and longed, all the time, to get to more important details. But Mr. Ackrill refrained from informing her as to his precise fortune, or the sum that he was prepared to settle upon his son when that bulwark of the aristocracy chose to marry. As a matter of fact, Mr. Ackrill did not once mention his son.

They ran past the gates a little, so that Philippa might admire the frontage of the Castle as seen from the road. Then he swung into the drive, acknowledging with a careless nod the respectful salutes of the men who were placing his family arms, carved in stone, over the gateway. They were met at the front door by a footman, who had come over from Birmingham by train that morning to wait upon his master at luncheon. Mr. Ackrill, still qualifying for membership of the Smart Set, spoke very brusquely to the footman. Philippa nearly laughed. It reminded her of a man in a melodrama.

She was impressed, none the less, with the Castle. It was a fine old building, with large, panelled rooms, wide oak staircases, and mazes of corridors.

'Good place to play hide-and-seek,' remarked Mr. Ackrill carelessly.

'It's all too beautiful for words!' vowed Philippa, squeezing her little gloved hands together in ecstasy. Oh, how I should love to live here!'

'Would you?'

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'Of course! Who could resist it? And so beautiful as you will be sure to make it!'

'Yes, I'm touching it up a bit. Running hot-water pipes through every room.'

Philippa, pressed very hard by her host, and against her better judgment, stayed to lunch. Over the coffee and liqueurs, the draper, who liked to know every detail of everybody's business, asked her to tell him all about herself. Philippa, not altogether unwillingly, complied. She knew the story well, having told it often into sympathetic ears, mostly masculine. In common with all the best stories, it was a delicate blend of fact and fiction.

'My mother,' began Philippa, 'was a very beautiful woman.' Then she paused.

'I can quite believe that,' said Mr. Ackrill.

Philippa was in the habit of waiting for this reply, just as an actor waits for the 'laugh' that he has found, by experience, follows the speaking of a certain line.

'Please!' pleaded Philippa. 'My mother,' she continued, gazing through the window at the skyline, 'was Uncle Walter's youngest sister. She must have been of a very high-strung, sensitive, romantic temperament.' Miss Secretan sighed a little. 'I fear I have inherited a great share of it.'

Second pause.

'Have another liqueur,' suggested Mr. Ackrill. This reply was not so fortunate as the last, but Philippa felt that he meant it as an expression of sympathy.

'Oh, no, thank you. At the age of eighteen, she fell violently in love with my father, who was a

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lieutenant in the navy, and entirely dependent, at that time, on his pay. Her parents opposed the match, but my mother eloped with my father, and they were married at a London registry-office the same day.'

'I thought——' began Mr. Ackrill, and then pulled himself up with a jerk. Miss Secretan ignored the interruption.

'Shortly afterwards, my father was ordered to rejoin his ship. For the sake of economy, partly, but also out of consideration for her feelings, he established my mother, with an old servant to take care of her, in a dear little cottage in Normandy.'

'I felt there was something French about you,' observed Mr. Ackrill, studying the girl with his head on one side. He lit another cigar. He was feeling pleasantly drowsy.

'Yes? Well, I was born in Normandy, and spent the first ten years of my life there. My father visited us as often as his duties permitted. I remember him as a strikingly handsome man, brilliantly clever, with a most charming manner. On his mother's side, by the way, he was connected with a ducal family.'

The draper nodded approvingly. This was the kind of afternoon a man deserved who had been a hard worker all his life, and had mastered every twist and turn of the drapery business from shirt-buttons to——

'Go on, my dear,' said Mr. Ackrill, puffing his cigar-smoke at the beautiful old ceiling.

'When I was about seven years of age, my grandfather—that is to say, my father's father—died, leaving rather more than four thousand

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pounds to my father. When I was ten, my father himself died, and the money passed to my mother. We returned to England, and took a little cottage in Sussex. By this time, I was almost a perfect French scholar, although so young, and my mother, who was an exceptionally fine pianist, taught me music.'

'I'm gettin' a grand for the drawing-room,' said Mr. Ackrill. 'You'll have to come over and give us a bit of a tune.'

'I shall be only too delighted. Of course, our means were very restricted, but we managed to get along somehow or another on our tiny income.'

'What was it in?' asked the draper.

'Breweries,' said Philippa, softly.

'Is it still in breweries?'

'No,' said Philippa, meekly. 'I thought it better to get rid of my brewery stock at a slight profit, some little time ago, and put the money in Canadian railways, and Japanese bonds, and a few little things like that. Of course, Mr. Ackrill, it's so difficult for a young girl, who knows nothing whatever about finance, to take care of herself in these matters. You, I am sure, will appreciate that.'

'You don't seem to have done so badly,' said the draper, elegantly smothering a yawn with a podgy hand.

'It's very good of you to say so.'

'Your mother is dead, then?'

'Oh, yes. She died when I was eighteen. I thought I had told you of that.'

'You were just going to,' said Mr. Ackrill, sleepily,

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'when we began about the investments. Well, what did you do then?'

'I came and lived here for a time with dear Uncle Walter. But, of course, one could not expect one's relations to keep one altogether, and, as I had made a few friends here and there, I started on a round of visits. I seem to have been paying visits ever since. That's my little story, Mr. Ackrill. I'm afraid it's neither amusing nor instructive. I have tried to put a brave face on things, and keep a light heart, but sometimes one cannot help yearning for a home of one's own, a resting-place for the sole of one's foot. You understand what I mean, don't you?'

There was no answer. Philippa, looking round quickly, observed that Mr. Ackrill's cigar had fallen to the floor and was burning a hole in the carpet. The little draper's head was well back, his lips parted, and through his nostrils came a gentle grunting sound. Mr. Ackrill was enjoying his after-luncheon snooze.

Philippa picked up the lighted cigar, and threw it out of the window. It lay on the broad terrace, smouldering in the sunlight.

Returning, she scanned the features of the sleeper. A bitter little sneer spread over her own face. But she looked from the owner of the Castle to the room in which they were sitting, and from that to the beautiful gardens and sunlit park.

Philippa nodded, and let herself out by the French window.

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CHAPTER XII

THE meeting between John Cogbill and Philippa —for the latter, you may be quite sure, did not mind in the least how many strings she had to her bow; it might have resembled a harp without causing her any serious anxiety—took place, as naturally as possible, the following Sunday morning after church. I use the word 'meeting' advisedly, for Philippa introduced herself to the young farmer during the service. The Vicarage pew was in the chancel, facing the choir and parson. The pew allotted to Nutlands Farm was at the top of the nave, so that John could not very well help seeing Philippa, unless he kept his face in his hat from voluntary to voluntary, and Philippa had only to admire the architecture of the nave and the quaint bonnets of the old ladies to see John.

It would be idle to pretend that John did not think Philippa very pretty. He compared her, in his mind, to an illustration in a book. Even in Birmingham, he had never seen any one so graceful. He wondered how Charity would look in a hat like that, and then promptly dismissed the thought. Charity was Charity — his dear little playmate of other days, the good, simple, sweet girl who was going to be his wife. As for this

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other strangely radiant creature, she was a beautiful picture, a lovely vision, a personage of dreams. John would no more have looked upon her as in any way a rival to Charity than he would have thought of marrying a Princess of the blood royal.

At that moment Philippa looked down the church and their eyes met. John felt confused, for she had caught him staring at her. Philippa was not confused. She had surprised a look of rapt admiration on the man's simple face, and her self-respect went up yet one more point. She raised her eyes to the opposite window, and kept them there for some little time. In theatrical parlance they call it 'holding the picture.' The school-children at the bottom of the church were fully convinced that Philippa was an angel.

Charity, for her part, looked neither to right nor left of her throughout the service. She knew, of course, just where John was sitting. She knew what he was wearing, and which of the hymns he would like and which he would not like, and, whenever there came a loud bang from the top pew, she knew that this was John trying to tuck his great legs away beneath the seat. But Charity's eyes never left her book, save when she looked at her father. She repeated every response, and sang every verse of every hymn. She followed the prayers and the lessons in her books. All these things, you see, she had been accustomed to do from childhood, and she would have felt dreadfully guilty had she allowed her eyes to wander.

As for the villagers, they noticed that she was

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looking pale and tired, and speculated, in whispers, as to the cause.

'It's 'avin 'er cousin there, I shouldn't wonder,' was Mrs. Bonehill's opinion. 'Every extra one makes a difference, yer know, and they say Miss Sacredturn don't lift a finger not to give any 'elp in the 'ouse. Take yer foot out of yer father's 'at, 'Arry.'

Towards the end of the sermon, Charity was rather horrified to find a little note pushed into her hand by Philippa. Opening it with some misgivings, she read:

'Is that Mr. Cogbill in the front pew? If so, after church would be a good time to introduce us.'

Charity tucked the note inside her glove. This day, then, would decide her fate. Philippa was quick and clever. She would soon find out whether John really loved, or whether he had proposed from a sense of duty. During the pause for silent prayer that followed the blessing, a very, very fervent little petition went up to Heaven from the Vicarage pew.

Philippa, self-reliant, was powdering her nose.

John lingered by the lych-gate. It was his custom to wait for Charity, for the old couple took their time over the short walk up the hill to the farm. He took his gloves from his pocket and put on the left one. This was out of compliment to Philippa.

'Good morning, John. I want to introduce you to my cousin, Miss Secretan. If you two will walk on, I'll catch you up in a minute. There's something I have to get from the vestry.'

It was done so quickly that John was alone with

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the dream-lady before he knew what was happening. Philippa, smiling at him very sweetly, led the way out of the churchyard.

'What a perfect day, is it not?'

'Beautiful,' said John, startled into forgetting the professional qualification.

'You're very busy with the harvest, are you not?'

They were in the meadow now. The warm turf, soft and pleasant beneath their feet, smelt very good. The air was full of the inexplicable quietude of an English Sabbath.

'We're getting in the hay,' said John.

'It's very good this year, isn't it?'

'Not much to complain of.' He was feeling at home with the vision already. After all, it was not so difficult to talk to these grand town people if a man was content to be easy and natural. His shepherd, passing, touched his hat. John gave the fellow quite a short nod.

'Is that one of your men?' asked Philippa, looking up at him with the beautiful eyes.

'Yes,' said John, glancing down at Philippa. An odd little tremor ran through his great frame.

'I suppose you employ a great many, don't you, Mr. Cogbill?'

'Goodish few.'

'It must be a great anxiety, I should think, to have to manage such a large farm as Nutlands. And every one says you do it so splendidly.'

'Who's every one?' asked John, with a little laugh.

'Oh, Uncle Walter, and Charity, of course, and

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the people I've met about here. By the way, I have to congratulate you.'

Another upward glance, returned, rather more boldly this time, by the farmer. And another tremor.

'Yes,' said John, nodding.

'And I do, with all my heart. Charity's a dear little soul. You'll be very good to her, won't you?'

They had reached the end of the meadow, and had to pass through a gate into the next. The ground by the gate was rather rough, and Philippa, stumbling slightly, laid her hand for a second on John's arm. In all his life, he had never felt so fairy-like a pressure.

'Won't you?' repeated Philippa, waiting for John to close the gate.

'Eh?' said John. 'I beg your pardon?'

'I was telling you that you must be very good to Charity, because we all love her so much. But I'm afraid you're angry with me for saying it?'

Angry with her? Fancy a man being angry with so charming, so dainty, so beautiful a girl!

'Are you?' asked Philippa, softly.

John laughed. 'You know I'm not,' he said.

'But you ought to be, you know.'

'Oh? Why?'

'Because it's no business of mine, after all.'

'You're her cousin.' This was great fun. He was bandying words.

'Yes, but you're to be her husband. And that's —oh, ever so much more important.'

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'Is it? Some folks, nowadays, seem to think that husbands are not of much account. At least, according to what one reads in the papers.'

'Please don't!' Philippa spoke very earnestly. 'I hate to hear any one talking lightly of marriage. It seems to me such a solemn, beautiful thing. Don't you think every one should try to make it so?'

'Oh, yes, of course,' said John. He was impressed with the girl's sincerity and goodness of heart. She seemed, too, quite unconscious of her beauty. John had read about such women, in whom all the gifts of the gods were combined, but he had never believed until this day that such an one could really exist in flesh and blood.

They turned into the lane. Philippa saw a wild rose in the hedge, and rushed to pick it. But the rose was out of her reach. Would Mr. Cogbill please pick it? He was so tall that he could reach it easily. It must be lovely to be so tall. How tall was he, actually? Really? Fancy! Only then he was so broad that nobody would ever guess him to be well over six feet.

The rose was tucked into her waistbelt. John gave it as his opinion that a mere wild rose was not worthy of such honour. If Miss Secretan would come as far as the garden of Nutlands——

'I should love to,' Philippa admitted, 'but I really think I ought to turn back and meet Charity and Uncle Walter. We must have walked very fast. Charity promised to overtake us.'

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'It wouldn't take a minute to pick a rose,' said John.

'But'—Philippa was looking down now—'perhaps Charity wouldn't like it? When girls are very much in love, you see, they're so — so touchy.'

'She wouldn't mind a bit,' John reassured her. 'Besides, I'll pick one for her as well, and you can give it to her.'

'Oughtn't you to give it to her yourself? She'd like it ever so much better, you know.'

'Oh, that's all right. I'm always giving her some. It's only a step,' he pleaded, 'to the garden.'

'It's a very pretty old garden. I get a glimpse of it from my bedroom-window, you know.'

'Do you? Which is your window?'

Philippa pointed with her parasol. 'That one there—the second from the end, with the creeper over it.'

'Oh, yes. Well, we might have picked the roses by now.'

'I suppose we might.'

'No use wasting any more time, is it?'

Ingenuous John! The more you persuade, the less likely she is to accompany you to the rose-garden. Once let her be certain that she has made an impression on you, that you will look forward to meeting her again, and she will be off like a squirrel.

'It's very kind of you, but I won't to-day, really.'

'To-morrow?'

'Oh, but you won't have time to-morrow. You're such a busy, important person, with your men to manage and your hay to get in. Do tell me!

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Have you got one of those cunning machines for piling the hay up on top of the rick?'

'Yes. If you 'll come in to-morrow, you can see it.'

'Tempter!'

'Will you?'

Round the bend of the lane appeared the Vicar and Charity, arm-in-arm. They were walking very slowly.

'Morning or afternoon?' asked Philippa, getting to business with a promptitude that would have appealed to Mr. Ackrill.

'In the afternoon, if that will suit you.'

'What time?'

'About half-past three?'

'All right.' And then, raising her voice, she went on: 'Didn't you think Uncle Walter's sermon this morning very beautiful?'

The sound of his own name reached Mr. Couchman's ears.

'What was that Philippa was saying?' he asked Charity.

'She asked John if he didn't think your sermon this morning very beautiful.'

'Indeed?' The Vicar smiled. 'I'm glad she liked it, but I'm afraid it was scarcely appropriate. I took it out of the Advent drawer by mistake.'

Not until the day was far advanced did Charity find courage or opportunity to seek her fate from the lips of Philippa.

'Oh,' said Philippa, 'I can't tell you yet, dear. He spoke very nicely about you, but the time, of

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course, was very short, and the conversation was not at all intimate. You must be patient for a day or two until I get to know him a little better. In the meantime, you sweet little thing, you're not to worry a tiny bit. Understand?'

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CHAPTER XIII

THE scene of our story shifts for a brief space to Oxford. In a fine old room that looks out over trees and meadows, with just a glimpse of the Isis through distant foliage, are half a dozen youths. It is the last night of Stuart Ackrill's Oxford career. This is Stuart Ackrill's room, and that is Stuart Ackrill perched on the back of an arm-chair, his feet resting on the shoulders of his sworn henchman, the big, bibulous 'Flappy.'

Stuart is about the same height as his elegant father, but not so stout, as yet, and smarter in appearance. He has a little dark moustache, neatly turned up at the ends. If he cared to do so, it is quite possible that he could hang things on it. His eyes, like his father's, are small, and set near together; the skin underneath them is puffy, for Stuart, the brave fellow, has been getting drunk with painstaking regularity almost every night throughout the summer term. Beginning as a bid for popularity, and succeeding as such to a surprising extent, his alcoholic habits have gradually endowed him with an unaffected taste for excessive drinking. Thanks to a liberal allowance, he is able to gratify this to the full, and also to keep in flattering subjection his poorer boon-companions with similar instincts.

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At this moment, Stuart is undoubtedly drunk, but not quite so drunk as Flappy. Flappy has the enviable reputation of being the only man in the college who can 'floor a sconce'—that is to say, swallow three pints of beer without taking the sconce from his lips. When he drinks wine, Stuart pays for it, just as Stuart pays for Flappy's cigars, theatre-tickets, and jaunts to town. The two, therefore, are inseparable, for Flappy loves to indulge himself at somebody else's expense, and Stuart likes to have Flappy at hand in case of personal physical attack. Even little men with plenty of money may occasionally be ragged at Oxford if they give free rein to their caddishness.

However, there was no fear of that to-night. Most of the men had already gone down, so that Master Stuart and his sycophants practically had the college to themselves. They had howled, and hooted, and thrown bottles about to their heart's content. Now they were tickling up the dying champagne with whisky, and felt that life was pretty glorious and the night still young.

'Buck up!' cried the heir of the house of Ackrill, chucking Flappy under the chin with the toe of his shoe. As Flappy happened to be drinking at the moment, this caused spluttering, swearing, and great laughter. Stuart felt that he was in tip-top form.

Flappy retaliated by catching Stuart by the ankles and threatening to tip him backwards on to the floor. But somebody ran to the rescue of the host, and somebody else squirted Flappy with a syphon of soda-water, so that the situation was

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saved, and the feast of humour continued with unabated zest.

For all that, Stuart was not satisfied. He wanted to celebrate his last night at Oxford with some glorious deed of daring that would live in the annals of the college. Somebody suggested that they should all climb through a trap-door in the roof and drop an empty syphon down the dean's chimney. This suggestion met with no support from Stuart, who covered the speaker with abuse that would have done credit to a London waterman. His friend, who looked rather ill, smiled a sickly smile.

It was Stuart himself who at last hit upon the notion, a particularly happy one, that crowned the evening's entertainment.

'What about paying a little visit to Smug Conway?' he said.

'Oh, rot!' said Flappy. 'He's a blooming teetotaller.'

'All the better, you silly owl!' cried Stuart, jumping down from his perch. 'We'll take some whisky with us and see if we can't persuade him to break the pledge. These teetotallers are getting a jolly sight too common. They're a disgrace to the college. Come on, boys!'

'Won't he have his oak sported?' asked somebody.

'Probably, but we must employ strategy. No noise, mind. One man must knock him up, and ask him to lend a kettle or something. The others can be round the corner. He'll leave his oak unsported while he goes to fetch the kettle, and there we are. Quietly, now!'

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They stumbled down the stairs, two of them supporting the grumbling Flappy on either side.

Conway lived in cheap rooms on the other side of the quad. He was precisely the kind of man to arouse the bullying instincts of creatures such as Stuart Ackrill. He was slight in build, and not sufficiently athletic to shine at games. This was one offence. Stuart himself played nothing more violent than billiards, but he attended race meetings as often as possible, and therefore ranked as a sportsman. Conway was sportsman enough to have made his way through the 'Varsity on an exhibition and a very small allowance from his father, but that kind of pluck is a little above the intelligence of the average young Englishman.

The quality in Conway, though, that Stuart Ackrill chiefly resented was his breeding. To employ a necessary though greatly abused term, Conway was a gentleman. His clothes were shabby, and cut by an indifferent tailor, but he wore them with a distinction that had come to him as a birthright, and which Ackrill both loathed and coveted. Stuart had dozens of fancy waistcoats, row upon row of exquisite boots, and ties of gaudy hue by the dozen. Yet he could not pass the shabby Conway in the street without feeling, in his very bones, that class distinction was very far from being a thing of the past, and that this quiet, courteous fellow, intent upon making the best of his career in order that he might earn an honourable living when he went out into the world, had the advantage of him in every way but one.

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For these reasons he had dubbed the exhibitioner 'Smug Conway,' had incited his little band of spongers to sneer at him whenever opportunity offered, and had more than once organised small 'rags' when the leading men in the college were not at hand to hold the balance. To-night, however, was an exceptional chance, and Stuart looked forward with vicious delight to making the most of it.

Conway—who was remaining in Oxford for a day or two on the chance of securing a private tutorship during the Long Vac.—was in bed and asleep; a rat-tat at his outer door awoke him. He was the only man sleeping on this side of the quad.; all the others had gone down. His oak was not sported, but he had turned the key in his door.

Wondering vaguely what could be the matter, he jumped out of bed, went into his sitting-room, and opened the door. Directly he caught sight of his visitor, he recognised him as one of the Ackrill gang, and suspected mischief. But he was not made of the flesh and blood that shelters itself behind barricades.

'Say, old chap, have you got a coffee-pot? Awfully sorry to trouble you.'

'That's all right,' said Conway. 'I'll get it.'

Before he reached the cupboard, they were all in the room, and somebody had locked the door on the inside. Ackrill, the end of a cigarette in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, was well to the fore. Flappy was leaning against the wall. The others formed a grinning group about their dauntless leader.

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'Hallo!' said Stuart. 'Good evening. We've come to pay you a little visit, just for auld lang syne. Hope we didn't disturb you.'

'What d' you want?' asked Conway, quietly.

'I say, old chap,' Stuart went on, 'don't adopt that tone, you know, or we shall have to turn nasty, and that would be a pity when we're such awful good pals. Wouldn't it, you fellows?'

'Rather,' chuckled the chorus, approvingly.

'Will you kindly leave my room? I want to go to bed.'

'I say, you chaps, listen to that! The poor little boy wants to go to bed! Wasn't he used to late hours, then? Did the nasty men get him up out of his little cot! Flappy, you ought to be ashamed of yourself; you really ought!'

Flappy, hearing his name mentioned, felt that he was expected to justify his present condition by making himself offensive. Detaching himself with some little difficulty from the wall, therefore, he lurched forward and caught Conway by the arm.

'Give us a drink,' he said.

'Yes,' cried the chorus, closing in on the victim, 'give us a drink! Come on, Smug! Where d' you keep your whisky?'

'I haven't got any.'

'Oh, that won't do for us,' said Stuart, growing bolder now that Flappy was in the van. 'I'm afraid you're a mean skunk, Smug. Have a look in his cupboard, boys.'

Conway instinctively moved forward with the idea of preventing them, but one of Flappy's monstrous hands tightened on his arm, and the other

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clutched him by the scruff of the neck. Realising that a struggle was useless, and would only precipitate matters, he remained motionless whilst the gang rummaged in his cupboard, breaking his china and hurling all sorts of articles to the floor.

'Well?' asked Stuart, who was now lolling in an arm-chair. 'Any luck, boys?'

The gang reported that the cupboard was innocent of whisky, and presumed that the reports of teetotalism were quite correct.

'Search his bedder,' directed Stuart, who was enjoying himself immensely. 'These blooming hypocrites are up to every kind of dodge. Turn out all his drawers.'

'Steady!' warned Flappy, tightening his grip again on Conway's neck. As for Conway, he kept his eye steadily on Stuart. He knew him for the instigator of the whole business, and the poisoner of his life in college. He felt murderous at that moment. He asked nothing better than that he should have a chance of getting at his tormentor.

'Hold him tight, Flappy,' said Stuart. 'He's looking ugly. Don't let him go, or he may get himself into serious trouble.'

And Flappy knew that the order must be obeyed.

The gang were evidently having great fun in the bedroom. There came the noise of banging of drawers and smashing of crockery. Stuart lounged across to the door and watched the proceedings.

'What's that?' he said, as somebody held up a garment. 'Isn't that a dress-coat, boys?'

It was. Moreover, it was a new one, having just come from the tailor's in view of the tutor-

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ship. Conway had stinted himself all the term in order to afford that suit. His old one was far too shabby for the house to which he expected to be going. As for getting the money from home, he knew that to be impossible. The strain of supplementing the exhibition strained the family resources to the utmost.

'Put it on, one of you,' directed Stuart.

'No, no!' protested poor Conway, unable to keep silent any longer. 'That's going a bit too far. It's a new coat.'

'Oho! It's a new one, is it?' This piece of information delighted Ackrill. 'Slip it on, Harry, old man, and let's see how you look in it. It ought to fit you like a glove. You're about his build.'

This drew a laugh, for Harry was very much bigger than Conway. All the same, he forced himself into the dress-coat, and the laughter grew hysterical as the seams began to burst.

'You're a lot of dirty cads!' shouted Conway. 'I'll kill you for this, Ackrill, when I get the chance. You wouldn't dare do it if you were alone, you miserable little——'

'I'm afraid we must apply the gag,' observed Stuart, blandly. Whereupon somebody forced Conway's mouth open, and somebody else stuffed a wet table-napkin into it as far as it would go, and then made all fast with a handkerchief. Harry, in the meantime, was displaying the coat to advantage by executing a kind of war-dance.

Stuart called upon him to halt.

'It's not a bad coat,' he said, examining it, 'but much too quiet for our sporting young friend.

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I'll see if I can't touch it up a bit. Somebody bring me the squish, if you please, and a tablespoon.'

There was a jar of marmalade, half-filled, on the floor at the foot of the cupboard. This was handed to Stuart, who proceeded to make long smears up and down the coat, back and front.

'Now the trousers and waistcoat,' he commanded. 'We must see that they match.'

In ten minutes the suit was ruined. Stuart completed the job by placing the jar, upside down, on Conway's head. Flappy held on to the victim like death. It was just as well that he did.

The lust of destruction awakened, the gang stripped the walls, smashed all the glass in the picture-frames and photograph-frames, placed the rest of Conway's clothes in a heap on the floor and poured ink over them, and tore the covers off his most cherished volumes. Stuart Ackrill walked to and fro, smoking a cigarette and encouraging his parasites to renewed fun. They did not rest from their labours until the whole of Conway's poor little worldly possessions were destroyed.

'Now bind him hand and foot,' came the order.

They bound him accordingly, and laid him on his back in the middle of the floor.

'Good-night,' said Stuart. 'Thank you so much for the fun you've given us. Quite comfortable, I hope?' Here the little wretch kicked the prostrate figure. 'You'll kill me, will you? Don't you know that it's very naughty to use violent expressions of that sort?' Another kick. 'Especially when people pretend to be such saints and smugs. Sorry we spoilt your pretty suit, by the

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way. If you write me a note of apology for your horrid language, I may send you some money to get another.' The speech was rounded off with a final and particularly vicious kick.

'There'll be the devil's own row about this,' murmured somebody. They were all beginning to get sober.

'Not for me,' said Stuart. 'I've ordered my car to be round at eight in the morning, and I shall be far away before anything's found out about it. Here, one of you! Stick up a notice on the outside of the door, telling the scout not to call him till ten.'

This was done, amid much muffled laughter.

'If the worst comes to the worst,' said Ackrill, as they assembled in his rooms again for a final drink, 'it'll only be a matter of a few quid. And the fun was worth it, eh?'

'Rather!' cried the chorus.

'Well, good-night, you chaps! I advise you all to get away before they let that fellow loose in the morning. He'll be sticking a knife into somebody if he gets half a chance. Flappy, mind you're ready sharp at eight. We'll surprise the old man at breakfast in the blooming Castle.'

'Right,' said Flappy, sleepily. 'Happy dreams, old man.'

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CHAPTER XIV

PHILIPPA had seen the cows, and the sheep, and the pigs and the chickens. She had been into the stables and patted the horses. She had been into the dairy and patted the churns. A little more encouragement, and she would have patted John.

She was now sitting on the sloping shaft of an old wagon, and John was standing opposite to her, begging her to be careful lest she 'dirtied her dress,' and offering to go into the house—not visible from this snug corner of the outbuildings—and fetch a cushion, or a rug, or something of the kind.

Philippa, smiling prettily, refused. John was not to spoil her. She had not come there to be spoiled. She had come to learn something useful and practical about farming. Why? Oh, well, one never knew when it might come in handy. She might even—— No. On second thoughts, that was silly, and Philippa would not say it. Pressed, she simpered that some day, in the far, far distant future, she might even have a farm of her own.

John roared with laughter. The idea was delicious.

'I think you're very rude to laugh,' said Philippa, pouting a little and raising her eyebrows.

'Fancy you!' said John, and laughed again.

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'But why? D'you think I should be so very foolish about a farm? D'you mean that I haven't brains enough?'

'I wasn't thinking of that,' he hastened to admit. 'I should think you've got too much brains.'

'But doesn't one need to be awfully clever nowadays to make a success of farming? At any rate, that's what everybody says.'

'Of course,' said John, duly flattered, 'you've got to know your way about. But that's not *your* kind of cleverness. You'd soon be mighty tired of it.'

'I don't see why.'

'Well, for one thing, you've never been brought up to it. You're a town bird, Miss Secretan, and town birds don't thrive in the country any more than country birds thrive in town.'

'But I'm not a town bird, Mr. Cogbill. (How nice and formal we are!) I've lived a great deal in town, I admit, but I've also lived a great deal in the country. I'm a poor little wanderer, you see, with no rest for the sole of my foot.'

Philippa, you will remember, had worked off this description of herself on Mr. James T. Ackrill. But the little draper had been asleep. It was too good to waste, so she used it up again on John. This time it fell on more fruitful ground.

'That's a pity,' said John. He meant much more, but dared not put all that he meant into words. Philippa, raising her lashes for a moment, read the rest in his eyes.

'Why do you say that?' she asked, softly.

'Well, because you don't seem to like it,' said John, disappointingly.

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Philippa baulked? Never!

'People cannot always have what they want, Mr. Cogbill.'

'I should have thought *you* could,' said John, waxing bold under the influence of the girl's beauty.

'I hate flattery.'

'I didn't mean it for that. I meant that I should have thought you could have settled down any minute if you'd had the mind.'

She smiled — a half-bitter, half-pathetic little smile. It was the smile of one who knew the cold, hard world only too well, and had yet managed to preserve the greater portion of her feminine gentleness and sweetness. At any rate, that was the way in which John interpreted the smile. And that was the way in which Philippa meant him to interpret it.

'It all depends upon what you mean by "settling down," Mr. Cogbill.'

'Why, getting married, of course.'

Philippa shook her head. 'I shall never marry,' she said.

This popular little pose was new to John. It took him by surprise.

'Why not?' he asked, bluntly.

'Oh, for lots and lots of reasons. Let's talk about something else. I'm sure you can't be interested in the subject of my getting married or not getting married.'

'Yes, I am, but we won't talk about it if you'd rather not.'

'Oh, if you're really interested.—Why *are* you interested, Mr. Cogbill?'

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'Well, I don't like to think of you as an old maid. It doesn't seem right, somehow.'

'But you'd rather I were an old maid than the wife of a man I didn't love, wouldn't you?'

'Oh, of course. But you're sure to fall in love with somebody before long.'

Philippa was silent. A ray of sunlight caught her hair, making it gleam like highly-burnished bronze. John had never noticed the colour of a woman's hair before. He began to feel very, very sorry for this lonely little lady. John was strongly inclined to encourage the sentiment. It is very pleasant to be sorry for pretty people — very pleasant indeed.

'Aren't you?' said John. He wanted to see her eyes again.

'I shall never fall in love—again,' said Philippa.

He coloured, thinking that he had blundered.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Secretan.'

'Oh, I don't mind, Mr. Cogbill. One doesn't speak of these things to everybody, but when one meets a real friend—— I may call you that, may I not?'

He nodded. 'Anything that I can do for you——'

'Please don't!' Philippa gave a nervous little laugh. 'You'll—you'll make me cry if you speak to me so kindly. You see, I'm not used to it.'

'I can't imagine any one ever being unkind to you, Miss Secretan.'

'Can't you? But then, you see, the people about here are not like the people — many of the people—I have to spend my life amongst. In Littleworth, life is gentle and smooth. You all

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love each other. You hardly know the meaning of the words jealousy and back-biting.'

'Oh, don't we, though?' said John, promptly.

'I shouldn't have thought so. You all seem to lead such peaceful, harmonious lives. How often,' she sighed, 'have I envied Charity! Nothing to ruffle her, nothing to harass her from day's end to day's end. I wonder whether, if I had had her opportunities, I should have been as kind, and as placid, and as unselfish?'

'I think you are as it is,' said John, stoutly.

'Oh, you *mustn't* flatter me, Mr. Cogbill. I told you I hated it.'

'I wasn't trying to flatter you, Miss Secretan. I think it's astonishing that a lady who's lived among the kind of people you were talking about should be so—well, so nice about other girls, and all that.'

This long speech left him rather breathless.

'Am I nice about other girls?'

'You always praise up Charity.'

'Could any one help it? Don't you think she's the sweetest little thing in the whole world?'

John laughed. 'I daresay she has her faults, like the rest of us.'

'That doesn't sound quite like the speech of a lover.'

'Well, you see, it's rather different with me and Charity. I've known her ever since she was a little kiddy.'

'Then I think it's all the more credit to her that you wish to make her your wife. If she had any bad points, you would have discovered them long ago. Wouldn't you, now?'

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'Maybe,' said John, taking off his hat and reading the name of the maker. 'Still, you never know your luck.'

Philippa rose from the shaft. She was quite sure now that John was not in love with Charity. She was also tolerably certain that he was beginning to be infatuated with herself. Of course, he would be a little awkward just at first in drawing-rooms and dining-rooms, but polished manners were not necessary nowadays in society. She wondered what the farm would fetch if they decided to sell it and settle nearer London. Or they might put a steward in to run it for them, and let the shooting.

'You're not going?' said John.

'Must. I believe I'm late for tea as it is.'

'But you haven't seen the little foal I was telling you about. She's in the lower meadow.'

'I'll see it another day, if I may.' Philippa held out her hand.

'Which day?' said John, taking the hand and holding it whilst he waited for her answer.

'Oh, one day next week, perhaps.'

'Why not to-morrow?'

'I'll see about it. Thank you very much for—*Oh!*'

The sentence ended in a little shriek. Philippa was staring over John's shoulder at the dark doorway of a loft. Her face had turned white.

'What's the matter?' asked John, turning quickly.

'That door—a man looked out suddenly and frightened me—a man with a horrid face and

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hardly any hair on his head. He looked as if he were scowling at me.'

'Who 's up there?' called John loudly.

There was no answer.

'Is there anybody up in that loft?' he called again.

Philippa was trembling now.

They heard the sound of heavy boots on the wooden floor. Next moment, Fred Palins appeared in the doorway.

'What are you doing up there?' asked John. His tone was angry.

'Gettin' some fodder,' came the surly answer.

'How long have you been there? It doesn't take you all the afternoon to get fodder.'

'I ain't bin 'ere all arternoon.'

'Come down, man. I'm not going to stand here shouting up at you.'

Fred turned, and descended the ladder backwards. When he was on the ground, Philippa noticed the powerful shoulders and arms of the fellow. She observed, too, the drink-marks in his face and eyes, and wondered why John retained such a man in his employ. Fred did not look at her again, but she felt that there was something hostile and sinister in his manner.

'Now,' said John, 'I've been here at least half an hour, talking to this lady, so you must have gone up to the loft before I came. It couldn't take you all that time to get a bit of fodder. You 've been asleep, I suppose?'

No reply.

'Answer me, man. Did you get too much beer inside you, and go up there to sleep it off?'

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'Ain't touched a drop since you took me on agen. You can arst any of 'em.'

'Well, then, what's the explanation? If you don't care to give one, you can take a week's notice, and it won't be of any use your applying to Nutlands Farm again.'

Fred Palins was in a nasty fix. For Triss's sake, if not for his own, he did not want to lose his job. Nobody else in the neighbourhood would take him on if he did. His character was too well known. On the other hand, if he told the truth, he would certainly offend John Cogbill. Another might have invented a plausible excuse, but Fred was not fertile in lies.

'I'm waiting,' said John.

'Well,' said Fred at last, 'I didn't want to disturb you and the lady.'

This awkward and unexpected reply found John without an answer. But it was Philippa, that shrewd, experienced girl, who made the graver blunder. She laughed. It was a forced laugh, of course, hastily summoned to bridge over the embarrassing pause. But it was real to Fred Palins. Blows with the naked fist were almost powerless to hurt him, but this girl's laugh of derision, as he thought it, wounded him to the quick. He never forgot it or forgave it.

Turning abruptly, Fred began to move off.

'Wait a bit,' said John, who had no desire to have the story put about the village. 'What d'you mean by "not wanting to disturb us"?'

'I thought maybe you was talkin' privit.'

'Did we look like it?' asked Philippa, with

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another laugh. Little she dreamed of the sullen storm that was brewing in Fred Palins's soul.

No answer.

'The lady asked you a question,' said John.

'Yes, you did,' said Fred.

'Well, you were quite wrong,' said John, with unusual curtness. 'Get back to your work, and don't go making any more such silly mistakes and wasting my time.'

They watched him as he trudged away, his shaven, bullet-shaped head lowered, his huge shoulders hunched.

'What a horrid man,' whispered Philippa.

'I'm afraid he's not exactly a beauty.'

'You ought to have seen his face when he first looked out of the loft. It was absolutely devilish —almost threatening.'

'Oh, that's nothing. He always looks like that.'

'I'm sure he couldn't always look as he did then. Any one would have thought I had done him a fearful personal injury. And then, how odd it was his saying that he didn't wish to disturb us! D'you think he'd been listening?'

'It doesn't much matter if he had, does it? There was nothing very private in our conversation, as far as I remember.'

'Of course not. Still, it's never pleasant to have the idea that—well, that there are sly, underhand people about one. I'm rather surprised that you employ him, Mr. Cogbill, especially when he speaks to you in that surly way. He never said "sir" once.'

'To tell the truth, if I had only myself to please, I should sack him to-morrow.'

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'Surely you please yourself in matters of that kind, don't you?'

'As a rule; but Charity persuaded me to take Fred Palins on again. He's got a little girl, you know, and they were practically starving a few days ago. He's a confirmed drunkard, as you can see for yourself, and when he's drunk he fights, and that gets him locked up. It's a nuisance having a man like that in a little village. In a way, one feels that one's responsible for him.'

'How good-natured you are!'

'I don't know about that. Anyway, if he's not more civil, and if he wastes his time, I shall have to get rid of him and let them take their chance. One can't afford to employ loafers in these times.'

'I should think not, indeed. I suppose,' added Philippa, to whom Mr. Palins's manner was gradually becoming explicable, 'he's very devoted to Charity, isn't he?'

'I think so. She seems to be the only person who can do anything with him. As for Triss, the child simply worships her.'

'I can quite imagine it. How anxiously he must look forward, this man, to the time when you and Charity are married. He'll always be certain of his place then, won't he?'

'Not he, unless he behaves himself.'

Philippa laughed. 'I think he will. I don't believe you'd dare to do anything that she didn't approve.'

'Oho! You don't know me, Miss Secretan.'

'I think I do, and I venture to prophesy

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that you're saddled with the gentleman for the rest of his days, whether he works or not. Unless, of course, you find some excuse for getting rid of him first—— Now I must rush. Good-bye, and thank you ever so much! I'll come and see the dear little foal the day after to-morrow.'

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CHAPTER XV

Old Mrs. Cogbill, you may be sure, was quick to notice the change in the demeanour of her son. When the conversation—it would be more correct, perhaps, to say the monologue—turned on Charity, as it did ten to twenty times a day, John would look out of the window, or take up the paper, or hum a little tune, or tap the table with his fingers, or, if sufficient excuse could be found, even leave the room. At first, his mother attributed this form of behaviour to mere bashfulness, but when two days had passed without the betrothed pair making any attempt to see each other, suspicion seized her. Was it possible that John did not love Charity—that he had merely asked her to be his wife because after all these years he thought it his bounden duty to do so?

And Charity—had she divined the truth? Was that the reason of her staying away from the farm? Old Mrs. Cogbill lay awake the greater part of the night, turning over in her mind the eternal problem of man and maid. Instinct told her that it would be injudicious directly to interfere further. They must meet the trouble themselves, if it existed, and find for themselves the best way out of it. At any rate, there was nothing to be gained by this moping and mutual avoidance.

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If she could do nothing else to help them, she could bring them together and leave them together.

It was the evening of the day after Philippa's meeting with Mr. Palins that old Mrs. Cogbill, having lain in wait very patiently ever since tea-time, happened to run into Charity a few yards down the lane. Charity had been visiting some of her humble friends in the village, Triss Palins included, and her face, though paler and thinner than Mrs. Cogbill was accustomed to see it, was yet suffused with an almost unworldly serenity that lent a strange beauty of its own to the plain features of the little spinster.

The gentleness of the twilight hour, the sweet scents and murmuring sounds of the June evening, the words of love and encouragement that she had been speaking to the poor and sick from whom she came, the happy laughter and clinging fingers of little Triss, the friendly darkness of the cool lane, and the sight of the home that had sheltered her since childhood and that she loved so dearly—all these influences combined to clothe Charity, at that moment, in a cloak of peace and contentment that was almost without seam throughout. The tears, it is true, were very near her eyes, but the throbs of her full heart were no longer bitter.

Charity took old Mrs. Cogbill's hands between her own and pressed them tenderly.

'Where are you hurrying to at this time of night?' she asked, smiling.

'I wasn't going anywhere, dearie. I was only just looking about for a bit o' food for the rabbits. But it don't matter so much as all that to-night. They've got plenty to go on with, and I must be

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getting back and keep me eye on a drop o' mutton broth as I'm heating up for me old man's supper. Annie's a good girl, you know, Charity, but you can't put old heads on young shoulders, for all that a good many folks seem to think as they can, and she's apt to be that forgetful that I'm after 'er all the time, upstairs and downstairs, until really I think sometimes one might almost as well do the work oneself.'

As she talked, she slipped her arm through Charity's, and led the girl towards the main entrance to the farm.

'How is Mr. Cogbill?'

'Well, he's not so bad for one of his age. As I tell him, you can't expect to go on, year after year, and never feel no difference. It's 'is spirits, yer see, Charity, as is so low. 'E feels leaving the farm more than some might think, an' 'e'll do nothing but sit in the porch all day, talking to 'isself about one thing an' another, until sometimes I tell 'im, "Well," I tell 'im, "you've 'ad yer turn, yer know, father, and what's the good of makin' a trouble about something as, after all, is no more than the common lot? Look at me," I says. "I don't carry on that way, or maybe there'd be nothing fer dinner, and then you might 'ave something to make a fuss about, an' no mistake." That's what I says to 'im at times, Charity, but 'e don't take no notice, bless yer! One might as well talk to the pump! Seems a'most as though 'e'd gone a bit childish, yer know. Ah! There 'e sits. Do you talk to 'im fer a minute, dearie. It'll cheer 'im up while I take a look an' see 'ow the mutton broth 's goin' on.'

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Mrs. Cogbill's loquacity, on this occasion, was not entirely devoid of method. Charity could not very well disengage herself without interrupting the flow of talk, and she was the last person in the world to be guilty of such a breach of etiquette. The girl, whose heart beat quickly when she found herself passing through the gateway, consoled herself with the thought that John was almost certain to be down in the fields. She would stay five minutes with old Mr. Cogbill, and then slip away to the friendly shelter of the Vicarage.

The old man had turned his head slowly and looked at them as they approached. But now his watery eyes were gazing out again across the meadows. And his lips, as ever, were mumbling, mumbling, mumbling.

'Good evening, Mr. Cogbill.' Charity seated herself on the opposite bench.

'A'right, a'right,' muttered the old farmer. 'Us 'll soon be out on it now. Me and my missis 'll soon be out on it now.'

Charity felt that this was intended, in some vague way, as a reproach.

'I hear they're making the little house near Yew Barn wonderfully snug and comfortable,' she said.

This was not, perhaps, the happiest remark in the world, but the situation was difficult, and she could think of nothing better at the moment.

'Ay, us 'll soon be out on it now,' repeated old Mr. Cogbill. 'You an' the lad 'll soon 'ave it now. Me and my old missis 'll soon be out on it.' His fingers, horny with the manual toil of earlier days, clasped and unclasped themselves about

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the handle of the rough stick upon which he leaned.

Charity was silent for a few moments, and then spoke of the hay, and the weather, and such topics. But she was always met with the same reply.

'Me and the old missis'll soon be out on it—soon be out on it now.'

In one way, therefore, it was almost a relief when John came round the corner of the house from the stables. He started on seeing Charity, and flushed beneath his tan. As for Charity, she was thankful that the fast-falling shadows of the summer night hid her agitation.

John raised his hat and made some formal salutation. Then he turned to the old man.

'Well, father,' he said, 'hadn't you better be getting inside? You'll be getting a chill, else. The evenings,' he added, in a lower tone, 'are none too warm.'

'No, indeed,' said Charity.

Mrs. Cogbill, hearing John's voice, lost no time in hustling her husband indoors. Then, with a little laugh, that was half an apology and half a blessing, she shut out the young couple.

John cleared his throat.

'There were almost two degrees of frost this morning,' he said.

'So father was saying.'

Silence. A wild impulse was taking possession of Charity. Why, after all, should she entrust so private, so delicate a mission to a third person? Philippa, of course, had earned her gratitude by undertaking the task, but would it not be braver and more fitting if she herself put the matter to

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John? Surely he would not be so quixotic as to ruin his life rather than wound her feelings by telling her the truth? Here, too, was the opportunity.

Courage, little Charity!

'The Vicar quite well?' asked John.

'Quite, thank you.'

'And your cousin—Miss Secretan?'

'Oh, yes. She was delighted with her visit to the farm yesterday.'

'I thought you might have come with her, perhaps.'

'Well, you see, I was busy and—and had lots of things to do.' If only he had said, 'I hoped you would have come with her!' 'Besides,' continued Charity nervously, 'I wasn't asked.'

'You don't need an invitation, surely.'

There was no answer to this. All her life, she had run in and out of Nutlands at the dictate of fancy, and there had always been a kindly welcome for her. It was ridiculous, now that she was supposed to be the future mistress of it, to begin talking about invitations.

'By the way,' said John, 'I'm afraid Fred Palins will have to go.'

At these words, all thought of self fled from Charity. It was barely an hour since she had left Triss, radiant in clean, mended clothes and a clean home. Father was so different now that he had left off drinking, the child had told her. He never got into tempers, and they had a good supper every night, and Triss took his dinner to him in the hayfield. It was lovely in the hayfield, with the sun, and the smell of the hay, and the dear

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patient old horses, and the flowers in the hedges, and everybody so busy and yet so kind. Triss had laughed happily as she described it all, and rubbed her sunny little head against Charity's sleeve and kissed it for sheer affection.

'But I thought,' said Charity, aghast, 'he was going on so well!'

'I'm afraid he's a bad lot through and through. I caught him loafing in one of the lofts yesterday, and when I asked him what he meant by it he was surly, and refused to give any proper explanation. I can't afford to have a man about the farm that doesn't behave himself. Besides, it's a bad example for the others.'

'I'm so sorry. He's not drinking, is he?'

'Seemed very much like it yesterday.'

'But only this afternoon I was with Triss, and she was telling me how changed he is since you took him on again, and how happy they are. Do be as lenient with him as you can! It's his last chance, you know—at any rate in this neighbourhood.'

'I think I've been pretty lenient already,' said John, rather sulkily. It is possible that Philippa's playful little sneer about Charity's influence had struck home, and was rankling.

The tone wounded Charity. In her present mood, moreover, she attached far more importance to it than was reasonable.

'You have been most good and generous,' she replied quietly. And then, after a pause: 'I want to speak to you about something else, John, if I may.'

It was John's turn to be agitated now. Had

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Fred Palins been gossiping already? Ah! Of course! He had told Triss what he had seen and heard from the loft, and Triss had told Charity. Well, it was a pity if a man couldn't talk to a pretty girl without being rowed about it as though he were a schoolboy again.

'What is it?' he asked, on the defensive.

The tone was not encouraging, but Charity had set her teeth.

'It's about—about our engagement.'

'Yes?'

'Are you quite, quite sure, John, that you don't regret it?'

'Why, of course, I'm sure.' He was sitting on the bench that his old father had just left. They were face to face, and very near together, in the dark, little porch. One of Charity's hands was lying in her lap. He might have taken it; indeed, he should have taken it, but he did not. 'I should be a pretty sort of shilly-shally. You ought to know that I am not that sort of man, Charity.'

Vanity! She was to be married, then, that John might preserve his own self-respect, and the respect of his neighbours.

'It would be better to shilly-shally than be unhappy all your life, wouldn't it?'

'I don't understand what you're talking about. Has somebody been saying things to you about me?'

'Oh, no, John. Besides, it wouldn't make any difference if they did. It's only what I've been thinking of myself. I thought that perhaps you were doing this because everybody expected it of you. But don't, please, let that have any influence

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with you, dear.' The word slipped out of its own accord. It was so accustomed to rise to Charity's lips when she was alone in the meadows, or kneeling at her bedside, that now it came unbidden.

When a woman speaks that tender, precious little word sincerely, no man can hear her quite unmoved. It is the maternal instinct which prompts it, and it is maternal love for which, at the last, men yearn.

John leaned forward. His strong hand closed over Charity's.

'Nothing has any influence with me,' he said, 'except that I love you, Charity, and I want you to be my wife.'

She did not speak. How could she? But he felt a shiver running through her small frame.

'Cold?' he said, stupidly.

She shook her head. And then a tear—small ambassador from her heart to his—fell on the man's hand.

'You're crying,' said John, greatly astonished.

Useless to deny it, for her little body was shaken with sobs. She fumbled for her handkerchief, but could not find it. Whereupon John, detecting her predicament, drew her on to his knee and presented her with his own.

Charity dabbed at her eyes, and presently began to laugh because John's handkerchief was so enormous. But she was still crying, too, so that what with laughing, and crying, and manipulating the handkerchief, and being hugged by John, she was such a busy little Charity that she never heard the click of the side-gate, and gave a great jump when

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she looked up and saw Philippa standing on the path just outside the porch.

'Sorry,' said Philippa.

In a flash, Charity had put the width of the porch between herself and John. As for John, he rose to his feet, but said nothing.

'Uncle Walter has been calling for you. I looked everywhere, and then just popped across here on chance.'

'Calling for me? Is it anything important? He's not ill, is he?'

'Oh, no. At least, I don't think so. I didn't ask him.'

'I must run across. Good-night, John.'

There was no 'dear' this time from shy, modest little Charity. There was not even a look, for all that it was dark in the porch. But her feet were as light as her heart as she sped down the gravel path and across the dark lane.

Philippa, escorted by John, followed more leisurely.

'I'm afraid I turned up at the wrong moment,' she said, employing such raillery as she felt he would understand.

John laughed.

'All the same,' continued Philippa, looking up at him in the manner sometimes described as 'arch,' 'it was a pretty sight.'

'So I should think,' said John, with another laugh. He did not want to lose the reputation that he thought he had made with her of an easy, experienced man of the world.

'I don't think you ought to laugh about it, Mr. Cogbill. Between lovers, they say, such moments are sacred.'

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'Ho! ho!' laughed John, rather uneasily.

'Don't you think so yourself?'

They had passed into the lane, where it was almost as dark as in the porch. The air was filled with the scent of the sweet night dew on leaves, and grass, and moss. The nightingale, down in the covert, was at it again with all his might. John and Philippa, as though by instinct, turned down the lane instead of entering the garden of the Vicarage. It is possible that her arm had touched his. Or it may be that some wee imp, with a flaming sword, forced them to divert their steps. At any rate, the fact of importance is this, that they turned down the lane.

'You must think so,' Philippa insisted softly.

'Think what?' asked John, looking down.

The perfume of her mingled deliciously with the scent of the dew-steeped leaves. She rustled as she walked. He could almost see the parting in her hair. The outline of her pretty little head fascinated him. John could have walked down the lane for ever.

'You know what I said.'

'I don't, honour bright.'

'You weren't listening, then.'

'I'm afraid I wasn't.'

'Isn't it rather rude not to listen when any one speaks to you very seriously?'

'Were you speaking seriously?'

'Of course I was!'

'Well, say it again, and I'll listen.'

But Philippa, of course, would not say it again. She was far too wise. The moment had passed with the passing of the touch of Charity's form.

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'Aren't you going to?' asked John.

'No. I must go in. They'll be waiting supper.' She turned abruptly.

'I hope I haven't offended you,' said John, anxiously.

There was no answer.

'Have I? I'm awfully sorry if I have.'

To reassure him, she laid her hand, as once before, upon his arm. The little pressure completed the work of destruction. The man's blood raced and surged.

At the very gate of the Vicarage, they paused.

'Good-night,' whispered Philippa.

He tried to articulate, but the sound that he uttered, though pregnant with meaning, was indistinct.

Their hands met. The girl's fingers held his, ever so lightly. He replied, as his manhood compelled him to reply, by throwing an arm about her shoulders, and drawing her to him, and kissing her upon the lips.

Philippa, triumphant, ran into the house. John, his triumph tinged with remorse, returned to the farm.

'After all,' wrote Charity in the Confidence-Book that night, 'John *does* love me, really and truly, and *does* want me, just little me, to be his wife! I think I'm glad of the tiny doubt, because it has made me love him all the more. God bless you, dear! I kiss you good-night.'

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BOOK III

CHARITY'S CALVARY

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CHAPTER XVI

STUART ACKRILL'S arrival at the newly-acquired ancestral seat was far more impressive than that of the head of the house. He tore through Ullenhall at top speed, leaving behind him a cloud of dust that made the little children fall on their knees by the roadside, and cover their eyes with grubby little hands. With a hoot-toot and a rattle he swung into the grounds, and pulled up before the door just as the footman was about to sound the gong for Mr. Ackrill's solitary lunch.

'Hallo, guv'nor!'

'Well, my lad!'

Flappy was introduced with a sideways nod. Flappy was looking particularly sweet. He was wearing a large cap the wrong way round, and his goggles rested on his expansive brow. His face was white and puffy from the debauch of overnight. His eyes were bloodshot. His overcoat was smothered in dust.

'Charmed to meet you,' said the little draper.

At luncheon, Stuart wanted to know what was doing. Hearing that there was nothing doing, he decided that he and Flappy would run into Birmingham to dine and sleep. Mr. Ackrill demurred. What was the use of his taking a Castle if nobody lived in it? There was pathos in the question,

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but Master Stuart did not see it. His father might have got a bit of a party together—some chaps with go in 'em, and some nice girls. At present, no feller could be expected to stick it. They would be over next day to breakfast, or luncheon at latest.

The mention of 'girls' gave the little draper an idea.

'There's a very pretty girl staying with one of the parsons near here,' he said. 'We might ask her over to dinner.'

Stuart observed that he mistrusted his father's notion of feminine beauty. But Mr. Ackrill praised Philippa so warmly that the curiosity of the young aristocrat was languidly aroused. Perhaps they could stick it for one night, he admitted.

'We shall have to ask the parson and his daughter as well.'

Stuart groaned. 'What's the daughter like?'

'I haven't seen her.'

'Never mind. She'll do for Flappy. He'll be improving company for her.'

Flappy grinned. The food had been good, and there was plenty of liquor.

Philippa hailed the invitation with glee, the Vicar with pride, and Charity with a sensation of sinking. She pointed out, rather falteringly, that Mr. Ackrill had not even given them time to call. Philippa replied that people in really smart circles were getting more informal every day, and Mr. Couchman, of course, attached but little importance to strict etiquette. He was thinking of the crack in the chancel wall.

Charity fell back upon clothes. She had nothing

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fit to wear. She had not had occasion to put on an evening frock for two years, and then she had compromised with a skirt and blouse. And she always helped Mrs. Lilley with the ironing on Thursday evenings. Furthermore, she had a headache.

The Vicar looked disappointed.

'Surely, my dear, you won't mind giving up one evening? Everybody has certain social obligations, you know.'

'Perhaps I can lend you something of mine,' suggested Philippa, running a calculating eye over Charity's little figure.

In the end, Charity had to give way. She told herself that it would soon be over, and that Philippa would be the only other woman present, and that nothing else really mattered now that she was certain of John's love. She would contrive that Philippa should have the place of honour, so that she might be served first. Philippa would know how to eat even the most intricate things, and Charity would watch her out of the tail of her eye. When finally baffled, one could always refuse.

Artie Yarwood drove them over in the 'King's Arms' fly. Philippa had done something to Charity's hair, and stuck a flower in it. She had also lent her a pair of cleaned gloves. (Philippa's were new. She had extorted half a dozen pairs from the impoverished undergraduate.)

'Don't you worrit yerself, my dear,' Mrs. Lilley had murmured at parting. 'Come what may, you're always a lady, recollect.' Which was kindly meant, though scarcely reassuring.

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Stuart attached himself to Philippa at sight, and never left her. The two older men talked local economics, gradually working round to the ominous crack in the chancel wall. Flappy, having barked a few questions at Charity, and grunted a few answers, decided that the rummy little thing was a negligible quantity, and applied himself steadily to the wine.

Throughout dinner, Philippa sparkled. She flattered the elder Mr. Ackrill and chaffed the younger. She was charmingly innocent on all matters connected with the country, and fascinatingly versed in tiny fragments of turf slang. She sprinkled her conversation with the names of titled personages of her acquaintance, but she was careful not to pepper it. In repeating actual conversations with such, it was evident that she was on intimate terms with them, since she had called them by their nicknames. On the whole, however, society bored her. She had deliberately avoided Ascot. Poor dear Lady M—— would never forgive her, she supposed, but Philippa couldn't help it. One had a right to call one's soul one's own. Didn't Mr. Ackrill agree with her?

Mr. Ackrill replied, with considerable humour, that that was a question for the Vicar to decide. The Vicar, secretly rather shocked, laughed a little. He looked upon the chancel wall as already half rebuilt.

Dinner over, Philippa led Charity out on to the terrace. Mr. Ackrill took Mr. Couchman to the study for a glass of port, very old and very expensive. It appeared that Mr. Ackrill didn't care much what he paid for a thing, but he must have

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the best. The Vicar, to whom the price of tea was of no little importance, said 'Yes certainly,' with great firmness.

It needed something stronger than a polite hint to separate Flappy and the liqueurs, and Stuart, being anxious to rejoin Philippa, allowed his natural courtesy as host to be merged, for the moment, in the impetuosity of the suppliant gallant.

'You're a drunken beast,' he said. 'Come on out of it!'

Philippa was not at all sure that she ought to allow Stuart to take her for a moonlight row on the lake, and Charity had no doubts whatever on the matter. For all that, Philippa went. The boat, it seemed, held two comfortably and three at a pinch. Flappy, having been kicked sharply on the ankle by Stuart, begged Charity not to leave him in solitude. Dilemma of Charity, suddenly simplified by the disappearance of Stuart and Philippa.

'Where would *you* like to go?' growled Flappy, looking down at Charity as though he were a city policeman and she a coster's donkey.

'Oh, I don't mind,' said Charity.

'What about indoors?'

'Certainly, if you like.'

'What about the dining-room?

'Yes, if you prefer it.'

'Fact is, I've left something there that I rather want.'

'Very well,' said Charity.

She soon discovered what it was that he had left there. Conversation became intermittent. The information that the Vicar had been at Oxford

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some forty and odd years ago made little or no impression upon the lethargic Flappy. His most original and longest remark was to the effect that old man Ackrill seemed a pretty fair specimen of bounder. Charity was unfamiliar with the term, but she thought it safe to reply, in her quiet little way, 'Oh, yes.'

Flappy laughed. He even unbent so far as to tell Charity that she was a quaint stick.

Charity, alarmed, smiled. 'I'm afraid I don't understand you,' she said.

Flappy laughed again, and rang the bell for whisky.

Stuart and Philippa, in the meantime, had pulled to the far end of the lake, and grounded the nose of the boat on a mud-bank. This lake, or glorified pond, was not very far from the Castle. Just at present there was plenty of water in it, but, as August drew on, mud was the main element. One of the new lord's plans was to dredge the lake and stock it with little fish for Stuart and his friends to catch.

'What a glorious night!' breathed Philippa, yearning at the moon.

'Ripping,' Stuart agreed, looking at her neck.

'Don't you simply adore moonlight?'

'Not bad,' said Stuart, with the air of one to whose praise a considerable responsibility attached.

'Oh, how can you be so cynical and indifferent! That's the worst of clever men. They so soon get *blasé*.'

Lightly he accepted the implication. 'You wouldn't call me *blasé*, would you?'

'Horribly,' said Philippa, studying his eyes.

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'Why? I don't see that.'

He lit a cigarette to lend point to the description, and threw the match into the lake with a careless twitch of the wrist that denoted a lavish nature.

'I knew it directly I met you.'

'Rot!'

'I did, all the same. I thought to myself, when your father was introducing us, "This man has a very interesting, clever face, but far too experienced for his years."'

'Oh, of course,' said Stuart, inwardly delighted, outwardly tired, 'I've knocked about a bit and gone the pace, and all that. But because a chap's seen life, it doesn't necessarily mean that he's *blasé*, does it?'

'I believe some men retain their illusions, but very few. May I ask you rather a rude question?'

'Yes, but I won't promise to answer it.'

'How old are you?'

'How old d'you think?'

'I should say'—Philippa screwed up her eyes and mouth as an assistance to calculation—'about twenty-five.'

'Wrong,' said Stuart, more and more pleased. 'I'm twenty-two.'

'Then you've no business to look twenty-five. I'm afraid you need taking in hand.'

'I think I do. What d'you say to having a shot at it?'

'Me? Oh, I should be no good. You want somebody much firmer, somebody you wouldn't be able to cajole and humbug.'

'I like that! I should like to see anybody humbugging you.'

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'It's the easiest thing in the world, I assure you. I'm so absurdly soft-hearted and sentimental. The moment you looked pathetic and asked for forgiveness, you'd get it.'

'I've heard that before.'

'Have you? I'm not surprised. The girls you meet must be so clever. Naturally, they'd know exactly what to say to please you. But I'm only an insignificant little nobody—a poor little wanderer with no home, no rest for the sole of my foot.'

She sighed deeply, dabbling her attractive fingers in the water.

'You seem to do pretty well on it,' was Stuart's comment.

'What d'you mean?'

'Well, I mean to say, for a "poor little wanderer" and all that, you're jolly well togged up; and you seem to have a pretty good time from what you said at dinner.'

Philippa shrugged her shoulders. 'One doesn't wear one's heart on one's sleeve, you know. It wouldn't do in these selfish, material days. But when one meets a man who really seems to understand, it's nice to open one's heart a little. I'm sorry I've bored you. Let's get back to the house and join the others.'

'Oh, you haven't bored me. D'you really want to go back this moment?'

'I'm sure you're dying for bridge or billiards.'

'Loathe playing bridge with the guv'nor, and Flappy's no good at pills. By the way, do you play?'

'Bridge? Very little. You see, I can't afford it, and I should hate not to be able to pay my debts.'

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'What about billiards, then? I tried the table this afternoon. It's not bad.'

'I play a little, but I'm not much good.'

'Well, come over to-morrow afternoon and have a game, will you? It'd be awfully decent of you.'

'I can't promise.'

'Why not? It must be pretty deadly up at the parsonage.'

'When you're staying with people, you have to study their convenience.'

'Rot! Make 'em study yours. That's my scheme of life. Say you'll come.'

'I'll try. I can't promise, really.'

'Well I shall expect you. Tell you what. I'll run round in the car and fetch you.'

'No, don't do that.'

Philippa spoke rather too hurriedly. It was no part of her scheme that John should see her being borne away in Stuart's motor-car. Stuart, however, interpreted her agitation as a compliment to himself.

'Right you are,' he said, winking at her through the moonlight.

They pulled back lazily, the smooth water parting at the bows with a pleasant little rushing noise, and tinkling happily as it caressed the sides of the dinghy.

Stuart looked almost wholesome by this light. Physically, he was not quite so unthinkable as the father. Socially, there was not very much to choose between them, save that Stuart, of course, was better educated. Humanly, the father was the better man of the two. Stuart was selfish and mean through and through. Mr. Ackrill had been

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toughened in the struggle for money, yet, once get under the hide, the blood still ran warm in his veins.

And John Cogbill? To-night, he was running third. Nutlands Farm was Nutlands Farm, but Ullenhall Castle was Ullenhall Castle.

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CHAPTER XVII

SOME wise one of a bygone age has said that a woman is never so happy as when she is playing a double game. If the saying be true, and one scarcely likes to throw doubt upon anything so venerable, Philippa should have been trebly happy during the days that followed. It requires no little skill to carry on three secret flirtations within an area of two square miles, more particularly when two of the replying parties are lodged beneath one roof, and the third is the property of a person lodged beneath one's own roof.

Philippa, however, though deficient, maybe, in some of the archaic qualities, such as sympathy, affection, gratitude and the like, was certainly not lacking in practical cunning. She continued to take a deep and serious interest in John's farm and John's general welfare. But the intimacy was fostered mostly at odd moments—a chance meeting in the lane, a stray encounter in the Long Meadow, a few words at the gate. Ten words and an eye-to-eye look were sufficient. John was not a difficult fish to play.

Towards Mr. Ackrill the elder she maintained an attitude that was half filial and half coquettish—

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filial when Stuart was present, coquettish when he was not. Both moods delighted the little draper beyond measure. It would be too much to say that, at this early stage, he contemplated the idea of asking Philippa to be his wife; he was far too cautious a man for that. But she had succeeded in converting him from a contented widower into a lonely gentleman of private means, and this, from the girl's point of view, was a great step gained. Nobody realised more clearly than Philippa, nevertheless, that the lord of Ullenhall Castle was just as likely to choose any other good-looking, well-bred, well-dressed girl who happened to come his way as herself.

As for Stuart, she alternately flattered him and sparred with him. She admitted to herself that he was more amusing than either his father or John Cogbill; he was more of her age, more of her world, and more of her disposition. On the other hand, she perceived in him qualities of selfishness and stubbornness that were likely to bring them into sharp conflict should their interests ever clash. In a word, Stuart would want his own way. Philippa, of course, must have hers, and she was not quite sure whether there would be money enough, particularly whilst the fairly healthy little father was alive, to allow of their travelling the greater part of the year in opposite directions.

So the game went on. Charity suspected nothing. True, she saw little enough of her affianced husband, but John had never been a demonstrative man, as we know, and Charity scarcely expected him to become so for the mere reason that they were

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formally engaged. It was her custom to slip across to Nutlands in the evening. There she would find old Mr. Cogbill, as usual, in the porch, whilst Mrs. Cogbill bustled to and fro, in and out, shepherding the slipshod Annie and already well advanced in the preparations for departure. And by and by she would be left alone with John, and they would talk a little, and she would slip her hand through his arm, and feel at peace with all humanity. Then, when Mrs. Lilley rang a little bell to announce the Vicarage supper, she would whisper good-night, and John, putting a great arm about her little shoulders, would bend down and kiss her. Why, indeed, should Charity have tormented herself with further doubts?

It was the second Saturday after the dinner-party at the Castle that there occurred an event of so arresting a nature that even the guileless Charity could not altogether mistake its significance. The morning was fine, but clouds veiled the sun in the afternoon, and the day closed with wind and rain. Philippa shivered so and looked so pitiful, that a fire — unwonted extravagance — was lighted in the dining-room of the Vicarage, and the Vicar, Charity, and Philippa remained to bask in the warmth and glow after Mrs. Lilley had cleared away the supper things. Philippa and the Vicar were playing draughts, whilst Charity darned away, cheerfully enough, at the contents of the sock and stocking basket, to which her cousin, that poor little wanderer on the face of the earth, had taken the opportunity of making liberal contributions.

Suddenly, there came a gentle tapping at one of

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the windows, which were shuttered. All three looked up, listening. A second time they heard the tapping.

Philippa went white. 'Oh!' she whispered, 'what can it be?'

'Probably a bit of ivy that has blown loose,' said the Vicar reassuringly. 'Your move, my dear.'

Philippa made a praiseworthy effort to move intelligently, but her shaky fingers had hardly touched the draught when there came a third tapping, clear and distinct. Charity fancied, too, that she heard a faint moan.

'Perhaps somebody has lost the way in the dark,' she said, rising.

Philippa stared at her wildly. 'You're not going to open the shutters, are you?'

'Of course,' said Charity. 'Why not?' She was moving across to the window.

'But you may be shot!' panted Philippa. 'Don't let her do it, Uncle! Don't let her do it!'

The Vicar laughed. 'There, there! Don't be nervous, my dear. I'm sure it's only a twig, or something of the kind.'

'I don't think so,' said Charity. 'I'm almost sure I heard a moan. It sounded like the voice of a child.'

Philippa's renewed protestations notwithstanding, she unbarred the shutters and folded them back. The next moment, she gave a little cry, and Philippa screamed aloud. Pressed against the streaming glass was a white face—the face of little Triss Palins.

Charity, you may be sure, was not very long in

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raising the sash, and Mr. Couchman, jumping up, lifted the child tenderly into the room. She was soaking wet, and shivering in every limb.

'Poor little thing!' exclaimed the Vicar. 'I wonder what on earth she was doing there!'

It was wonderful to note how quickly and instinctively Charity took command of the situation. Without wasting time in foolish questions or still more foolish comment, she hurried Triss into the kitchen, began to undress her before the fire, and sent Mrs. Lilley running upstairs for the warmest and biggest blanket she could find. In less than ten minutes, Triss was nothing but a little bundle of wool, with a white face peeping out at the top. In another ten minutes, Mrs. Lilley, talking nineteen to the dozen all the time, had some good hot broth all ready in a basin, and was standing by to add pepper and salt to taste.

The Vicar, in the meantime, was walking in and out of the kitchen at a great pace, suggesting little drops of hot port, or little drops of hot whisky, or little drops of hot brandy, and all the time carrying in his hand the key of the front door under the impression that it was the key of the wine-cellar. But Charity gently refused all such offers on Triss's behalf, and sent Mrs. Lilley bustling upstairs again to take the sheets off Charity's bed and make the blankets all nice and warm with the bed-warmer. So that within half an hour, at the very outside, of the appearance of that pathetic face at the dining-room window, there was Triss Palins, if you please, lying very warm and snug in Miss Charity's bed, with Miss Charity herself holding her hand underneath the blanket, and Mrs. Lilley

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making yet another fire in the bedroom, and the Vicar walking in and out with lighted lamps, each larger and brighter than the last, and saying 'Dear me!' and 'Upon my word!' to himself as regularly as the old clock in the church tower ticked out the passing moments.

'If you please, Miss Charity,' said Triss at last, when she had partially recovered from her astonishment at this overwhelming kindness, and had pinched herself to make quite sure that it was not all a dream, and that she would presently awake to find herself in her own little bed in the rickety cottage, 'if you please, Miss Charity, I'm very sorry to give so much trouble. I didn't go for to do it for the purpose.'

'That's all right, Triss,' said Charity, kissing her. She signalled to Mrs. Lilley and her father to leave her alone with the child, feeling that, whatever story Triss had to tell, she would tell it more coherently when they were alone.

'Only,' explained Triss, 'I couldn't bear to be alone any longer when it was raining and blowing so, and I didn't know what time father would be home.'

'So you came to me. I understand. You were quite right, dear. And you're not to think it's any trouble, because it isn't. Why, you don't know what fun it is having you here, and to-night you shall sleep with me; so there's nothing more to be frightened of.'

'Isn't Mrs. Lilley angry with me at giving her all that trouble?' asked Triss, genuinely astonished.

'Not a bit. She's only thankful that you haven't taken cold, and so are we all.'

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'You see,' said Triss, thoughtfully, 'I didn't knock at the back door, because the folks all say that Mrs. Lilley's got such a temper, especially with children. And I thought she might send me off, and then I shouldn't have known what to do at all. And I was going to knock at the front door, and then I remembered that Mrs. Lilley would answer that as well. So I went round the house, and I saw the lights in the window, and I heard Mr. Couchman speaking. But I waited ever such a long time before I dared knock—oh, ever such a long time. And then, when I did knock, there was no answer, so I waited a bit, and then knocked again, and I *was* glad when I saw you looking out at me, Miss Charity. I knew it would be all right then.'

'That's right, Triss. I've always told you to come to me when you were in any great trouble, haven't I?'

'Oh, yes, Miss Charity, and that's why I came. I didn't like to go to none of the neighbours because they say such dreadful things about father when he's——'

She paused abruptly, looked up at Charity for an instant, and then, with a little sob very pitiful to hear, turned away and drew the blanket over her face.

Charity, guessing what had happened—but only in part—leaned down and gathered the child tenderly in her arms.

'Don't cry, Triss,' she murmured. 'Perhaps your father is not—perhaps some work or business has kept him out.'

Triss shook her head very decidedly.

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'He's drinking,' she said. 'He said he should, because Mr. Cogbill's turned him off the farm.'

'What? What's that you say?' Triss had never heard Charity speak quite so sharply before.

'Mr. Cogbill's turned him off the farm. He came home at two o'clock in ever such a rage, and said he'd been turned off for no fault of his own, and that it was no good trying to keep straight, because folks wouldn't give him a chance. And then he swore about somebody, but it wasn't Mr. Cogbill. And I heard him say your name, Miss Charity, only it was such a jumble I couldn't make it out. And then he said he was going to the public, and I begged him not to—oh, ever so many times. But he would go, and he took nearly all his money with him, and I ain't seen nothing of 'im since. Oh, whatever shall we do? Nobody won't give 'im another job, and we shall 'ave to go to the 'Ouse or else on the tramp. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!'

'Triss, if you cry like that you'll make yourself ill, and I shall have to be very angry with you. Listen to me. I've helped you before, and I'm going to try to help you again. You won't go to the workhouse, and you won't have to go on the tramp, so there's nothing so much to cry about. Now I have to leave you for a little while, but I'll ask Mrs. Lilley to come and sit with you.'

'Will you be gone long, Miss Charity?' Triss was drying her eyes, and making noble endeavours to breathe regularly.

'About half an hour at the most. You'd better turn over and try to get to sleep.'

She tucked the blankets about the child's

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shoulders, kissed her, lowered the lamp, and saw to the fire. Then she slipped on a pair of goloshes, and a thick cape that had done duty for many winters.

Old Mr. Cogbill, still wearing his hat and grasping his stick, crouched over the fire, staring into the mass of glowing fuel. John sat at the table, busy with his accounts. Mrs. Cogbill and Annie were washing up the supper things.

Charity made her way round to the back, and tapped at the door.

'Mercy on us!' cried Mrs. Cogbill. 'What in the world are you doing out on a night like this, Charity? Why, it's pouring cats and dogs, and you with not so much as an umbrella! Has anything happened? Don't tell me yer Pa's been taken ill when I saw him this afternoon with me own eyes looking as well and strong as ever he did in his life! (Annie, my girl, you might as well shut the door and keep the wet out instead of standing there and gaping at Miss Charity as though she'd escaped from the 'Logical Gardens.) Take off yer cape, my dear, and let me hang it to the fire a minute. Well, upon my word! What next, I wonder!'

'I'm so sorry,' said Charity, 'to trouble you at this time of night.'

'Trouble?' cried the old lady, giving the cape a good shake before hanging it over the back of a chair. 'Bless you, my love, you couldn't trouble anybody if you tried. (Annie, I shall 'ave to speak to you in a way you won't like if you go lodging my big dishes on the edge of the table where any-

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body might knock 'em off with the flick of a duster.) Sit yer down, Charity, my dear, or would you rather go through into the parlour? I shall be done with these few things in a minute, and we should 'ave bin done long before this if Annie could only wash as fast as I can wipe.'

'May I speak to John a moment if he's in?'

'Speak to 'im? Why, to be sure you can! I should think so indeed. Go through into the parlour, my love. You 'll find 'im there with 'is father. Maybe you can give 'im a hand with 'is figures.'

If his mother had only known it, John needed help badly enough. His mind was not concentrated on the figures before him. He was wondering whether he had been right, after all, in dismissing Fred Palins, and what Charity would have to say about it after church next morning. And he was thinking about Philippa, conjuring up vague shadow-pictures of her face and form. Two and three made five, and four made nine, and seven made sixteen, and eight made twenty-four, and six made—What did six make?

How pretty she was! How troubled she had been that morning because he insisted on dismissing Palins lest he should frighten her again! Charity, of course, would be angry, but a man couldn't please everybody. And six made thirty-two, and three made thirty-five, and eight made —Besides, Charity did not know all the facts. If he tried to explain them to her, he would be sure to get in a muddle. As Miss Secretan said, some things were impossible to explain, and this was one of them. And eight made forty-three, and six made forty-eight, and——

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He heard the door opened, but did not turn round. It was either Annie or his mother. Forty-three and six made——

'May I speak to you a moment?'

John jumped so that, at any other time, Charity would have laughed. But she was not in the mood for laughter to-night.

Old Mr. Cogbill turned his head slowly, looked at the visitor, and then stared into the fire again.

'Us'll soon be out on it now,' they heard him murmuring. ''Soon be out on it now.'

'You gave me quite a start,' said John. 'I never expected to see you across here on a night like this. Is it still raining?'

'Yes, very fast.' She closed the door. 'Shall I be disturbing you if I speak to you for a moment on rather an important matter?'

'No. Won't you sit down?'

'Not now, thanks, because I want to get back. John, Triss Palins is at our house. The poor little thing's in great trouble about her father.'

John turned, thrust his hands into his pockets, and walked across to the table. Charity knew that he resented her interference, but she was bound to go on, even if it cost her his affection.

'I've turned him off,' said John. 'I told you I should have to if he didn't do better. I gave him a fair trial.'

'Yes, I know you did, dear, and I know that you did it to please me. Only I wish you could have told me before you took this decisive step, because I think I have some influence with him, and I might have made him do better. It seems he told Triss that it wasn't his own fault.'

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John shrugged his shoulders.

'I daresay he did. But that doesn't prove anything. He was sure to say that. They all do. I should think you might give me credit for knowing my own men.'

'I do, dear.' She went up to him and laid her hand gently on his arm. 'Of course I do. And I've no right to interfere—not the least in the world. But if you had seen that poor little thing outside our window, as white as a sheet and soaking wet—not that that's anything to do with it, I know.'

John was feeling pretty bad himself at that moment. The old influence of Charity's sweetness and gentleness was asserting itself.

'I'm just as sorry for the child as you are, Charity. But I can't employ every drunkard in the neighbourhood for the sake of his children. It isn't reasonable for anybody to expect it. I should soon be in the workhouse, I can tell you.'

'Did Palins get drunk, then? I thought he was keeping quite sober.'

'I don't know. No, I don't think he was drunk.'

'But you used to say he'd be such a good man at his work if only he would give up drink.'

'Oh, he did his work all right. I didn't sack him on that account.'

Charity was puzzled. There was a reticence, almost a secrecy, in John's manner that was quite foreign to him.

'He wasn't dishonest, was he? Please don't think I'm cross-examining you. You needn't tell me anything more about it, of course, unless you like.'

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'There's nothing to tell. I turned him off because he was surly and rude, and seemed to be always hanging about in odd places when he ought to have been at work.'

'How very strange! D'you mean that he was rude to you.'

'I should like to have seen him!'

'To Annie or one of the maids perhaps?'

'He was never rude to anybody in my presence. I only heard about it.'

'But it may have been spite, you know, dear. He's not popular among the other people about the farm, I daresay.'

'Well, as a matter of fact,' said John impatiently, 'it was your cousin who complained about him.'

'Philippa?'

'Yes. He tried to frighten her, it seems. You wouldn't have me pass over a thing like that, would you?'

'But—I can't understand it. Why should he be rude to Philippa? And why did she never say anything to me about it?'

'I don't know. I suppose she didn't want to make more fuss than she could help. If I were you, I'd let the matter drop. The man's hopeless. We ought to see if Triss can't be got away from him.'

He returned to his chair, and Charity, presuming that he wished to get on with the accounts, said good-night all round and ran back through the rain to the Vicarage.

Triss woke up as she entered the room, and inquired eagerly for news of her father. But Charity had none to give. She told Triss not to

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worry her head about anything until the morning. They were certain to see him or hear from him in the morning.

'He's sure to get fighting,' said Triss, thoughtfully, 'and then they'll send him to gaol again.'

'We must hope it won't be as bad as that, dear. But, if they do, you shall stay with me here until he comes back to you.'

'Oh, Miss Charity!' sighed Triss. And she went to sleep with a little smile about her lips that was not often there.

Charity lay awake for hours, worrying over the problem of Fred Palins's attitude towards Philippa. She knew very well that her cousin had been to the farm on several occasions; indeed, had not these visits been paid in Charity's own interests? But why had Fred tried to frighten her? And why had Philippa said nothing about him when reporting the upshot of each visit to Charity? Was it possible that Fred had misconstrued Philippa's motives—that he had regarded her as Charity's secret rival? If so, it was very absurd of him, of course, but she could not help being touched by his silent loyalty.

They heard next morning that Palins had become very violent towards closing time, had broken a chair over the head of a boon companion, and had been taken into custody by Constable King, locally reinforced. On Monday he was brought before the nearest magistrate, who promptly sent him back to Warwick for a month, without the option of a fine.

That afternoon, when Charity went down to the village with Triss to get such clothes as the child

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would need, Constable King, just returned from Warwick after escorting the prisoner thither, found an opportunity to slip into Charity's hand a sealed note, rather dirty and crumpled.

'Poor old Fred begged me to give yer this, miss, and not ter let any one see me do it. He was that eager I couldn't refuse him.'

'All right, Mr. King. Thank you very much.'

She slipped the note into her pocket, and did not open it until they were back at the Vicarage, and the door of her room was safely locked. Then she read:—

'she's trying to get im away from yer i seen im kiss er in the lane

yore frend F P'

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CHAPTER XVIII

CHARITY went straight across to Nutlands.

She found Mrs. Cogbill and Annie turning out the spare room. In theory, Annie was doing the actual manual labour whilst Mrs. Cogbill took command and issued orders. In practice, the old lady both issued the orders and carried them out herself, Annie, in the meantime, presenting a picture of incompetent willingness as she followed her mistress in and out.

'Goodness gracious, Charity,' cried Mrs. Cogbill, 'why, you look as white as a sheet! Come and sit down, dearie. (Take that jug and basin off the chair, Annie, my girl. That's a silly place to put them, you know. I might have plumped down there meself without looking round.) It's the thunder in the air that's been too much for you. I've had a kind of gone feeling all day, but when there's things that's got to be done the only thing is to get up and do them. (Run downstairs, Annie, and see if the kettle's on the boil yet.) We shall be having a cup of tea in a minute, and that'll soon put you right.'

'Do you know where John is?'

'I think he went down to the Field Barn, but he's sure to be back directly for his tea.' And

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then she added, with a sharp look at Charity, 'There's nothing wrong, is there?'

'I only want to speak to him for a minute.'

'Very well, dearie. Perhaps you'd like to walk a little way and meet him?'

'Yes, I think I'll do that.'

The old lady made no sign and spoke no word as the girl left the room. It is sometimes the most exquisite expression of sympathy to stand mutely aside.

John, walking moodily, with bent head, suddenly looked up and saw Charity. She smiled as she greeted him.

'Taking a stroll?' said John.

'I came to find you.' She stood quite still in the narrow pathway. 'I want to speak to you.'

'Nothing the matter, is there?' But he was frightened, for all that. There was something so definite, something almost commanding in its finality, about Charity's bearing.

'I want you to tell me, John, quite frankly, whether you really wish to marry me.'

She looked up, searching his face. He looked down, but not quite into her eyes.

'Why, what makes you——'

'Don't be afraid of hurting me. I can bear it if you will only be quite simple and straightforward with me. So much depends on it—my happiness as well as yours, you know. If you have changed your mind, dear, I shall understand. I always knew that I—wasn't good enough for you.'

'Don't talk like that.' Her gentleness and humility cut him to the quick. 'You're ever so much too good for me, if you only knew.'

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'Knew what?'

The quickness of the question found him off his guard. He stumbled in his speech, and turned to pick a stray straw from a bramble near by. Never was guilt written more plainly all over a man's face and form. And never was a man more conscious of guilt than poor John Cogbill at that moment.

'Oh, I—I don't know that I meant anything in particular. Only, I mean to say——'

'Are you sure you didn't mean anything in particular? Don't think I want to be inquisitive, or that I'm accusing you. You have a right to do as you like with your own life, dear.'

'Has any one,' he asked, slowly, 'been saying anything to you about me?'

'Yes,' said Charity, quietly.

'They have? What?' He spoke quickly this time, in a defensive tone.

'Need we——? Does that matter?'

'I think you ought to tell me what they have been saying, and who said it. It's not like you, Charity, to pay attention to scandal.'

'This is not scandal. If what I have been told is true, it merely means that you made a mistake in asking me to be your wife, or that you asked me against your will, because it was expected of you. Everybody makes mistakes, and the only thing to do is to set them right as soon as possible. That was why I came straight to you, and asked you to give me your answer to my question.'

'What have you been told?'

'That you are in love with my cousin.'

'Who told you that?'

'I don't think it fair to say.'

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'Were you asked not to say?'

'No.'

'Was it Fred Palins?'

Charity hesitated. She was naturally loth to make further trouble for the luckless Fred.

'Why do you ask that?' she said at last.

'Because he used to spy on us.'

'Spy on you? When? Why should he?'

'I don't know. I'm only telling you just what happened. Miss Secretan, as I suppose you know, came to look round the farm one day. We were chatting together, and suddenly she saw Palins peering at her from the doorway of a loft. I suppose he thought he was looking after your interests, or some nonsense of that sort. I always thought that the fellow was not quite right in his head.'

'Was that why you dismissed him, John?'

'Well, it seems to me a fairly good reason.'

'I don't mean about his being wrong in the head. When he's sober, as he was all through this last time, I always find him perfectly sensible and very anxious to do his best. Did you dismiss him because Philippa saw him looking at her from a loft?'

'Partly. He'd no business in the loft at all. He was wasting my time.'

'I see,' said Charity thoughtfully.

'Of course, if you're going to take the word of a man like that——'

'There's no need for us to quarrel, John, dear. I didn't take his word, not because I cannot trust him, but because I think he may have been mistaken in what he told me.'

'That I was in love with Miss Secretan?' He laughed, rather uneasily.

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'Yes. At least, not quite that, but it must mean that.'

'Now you've said so much, you might as well tell me the rest.'

'He sent me a little note, written after he was taken up. In it he told me that he had seen you kissing Philippa.'

She paused a moment. He said nothing.

'I only want you to tell me,' she went on, 'whether he was mistaken or not. If he was, that's an end of the matter. If he was not, please be quite frank with me, dear. You must know that I would never for a single instant stand in the way of your happiness.'

'I shouldn't have thought,' said John, making a melancholy attempt to carry things off lightly, 'that a kiss mattered so much.'

'Not to some men, perhaps. But you're not like that. Don't try to deceive yourself, dear, for the sake of sparing me. You wouldn't have kissed her unless you had been in love with her. I'm sure of that.'

Charity's reasoning, however illogical it may sound in the ears of the sophisticated townsman, was quite convincing enough to embarrass John Cogbill. His mental faculties, moreover, never, perhaps, of the most acute order, were further obscured by the fact that he felt unutterably mean. Had Charity abused him, his innate pugnacity would have bolstered up his self-respect. But when she simply made herself a thing of nought in comparison with his happiness, remorse robbed him of his manhood and even of his power of speech.

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Charity took one of his hands, pressed it for a moment between her own, and then let it go. 'Twas her farewell.

'You 'll be late for tea,' she said.

Side by side, they walked slowly back to the farm.

'I hope you 'll remember,' John managed to say, 'that it was you who threw me over; not the other way about.'

'If you like,' she replied, only eager to make it as easy as she could for him.

'It 's the truth,' said John.

They had to cross a lane. It was not the same lane that ran between the farm and the Vicarage, but one less frequented. There were places in which a tradesman's cart could hardly squeeze between the high banks, and the ground was wet and muddy nearly the whole year round. Charity was surprised, on glancing down the lane, to see Philippa slowly approaching them.

Realising at once the awkwardness of the meeting under the circumstances, she bade John wait for Philippa, and, before he could expostulate, had climbed the stile on the other side of the lane and was lost to view.

Philippa quickened her steps a little.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Cogbill,' she said pleasantly. 'What have you done with Charity?'

'I suppose she was in a hurry,' said John.

'Sure you haven't been having a little tiff—just a pretty lovers' quarrel?'

'Oh, no,' said John. He was not in the mood for this sort of thing.

'I'm sorry. You needn't snap my head off, Mr. John.'

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He looked down. She was carrying her sun-hat by the ribbons. It was really a very pretty head. He was not in love with her, or anything like it, although Charity would have it that he must be. None the less, when the afternoon sun came through the leaves and lit up her hair——

'I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to speak rudely.'

'I forgive you. I know by instinct how you must be feeling. Was she very cruel to you?'

'I assure you there's been no quarrel, Miss Secretan. I don't think I've ever quarrelled with Charity in my life. I don't see how anybody could. She's so sweet and gentle.'

'It's nice of you to speak like that about her.'

Philippa wondered whether she could make him kiss her a second time. It would be rather fun, in the very teeth of these affectionate protestations. Besides, how different he was from the miserable, decadent little wretch she had just left!

'I'm afraid,' she added softly, 'nobody will ever speak so beautifully about me.'

'I don't see why they shouldn't,' said John, rather disappointingly.

'Don't you? I'll tell you why. I'm so absurdly sensitive that I can never do myself justice with people. For instance, you think me silly, and flippant, and shallow. Oh, you may deny it, but I know you do, in your heart of hearts. Well, you are quite right, because you have never seen me in any other mood.'

'Only once,' said John, striding into the trap.

'Once? I wonder when that was.'

'Don't you remember?' They stopped, for no

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stated reason, beneath the friendly branches of a great elm.

'I'm afraid I don't. Won't you remind me?'

'Don't you remember that night in the lane?'

'No,' said Philippa, gazing steadily into his eyes. 'At least'—with a little catch in her breath as she looked away again—'I mustn't remember it.'

The influence of her beauty was as strong as ever. In a twinkling, the emotion and contrition of the last half-hour notwithstanding, he was caught in the toils.

'Why not?' he said, putting his hands on her shoulders.

'Because, for one thing, you belong to somebody else.'

'Suppose I didn't—what then?'

'It's no good supposing anything of the sort.' She made a slight movement, but the grip on her shoulders tightened. 'Let me go, please, will you?'

'Suppose I didn't,' repeated John, breathing quickly. 'What then?'

'But you do, you see.'

'No, I don't.'

'What?' Philippa was genuinely startled. She stared up into John's sunburnt face with very wide eyes.

'You 'll keep it to yourself, of course?'

'Oh, of course. What 's happened? Tell me.'

'It seems that we were being watched that night in the lane—the night you don't remember.'

'Who by?'

'Palins. He told Charity about it, and she's broken off our engagement.'

'Nonsense!'

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'It's quite true, although I can hardly believe it myself.' He had released Philippa by this time, and drawn away a little. 'It happened not half an hour ago.'

'Was she very furious?'

'Not a bit. She said—Oh, I suppose she's quite right.'

'What did she say?'

'Well, she said that I couldn't really be in love with her or I shouldn't have wanted to kiss anybody else.'

'And—are you in love with her?' The pretty head was modestly lowered. She was picking the petals off a daisy.

'I'm very fond of her—always have been.'

'D'you think that's quite the same thing? I mean—Oh, but it's nothing to do with me.'

'What were you going to say?'

'Well, if I were a man, I think I should want to be quite sure before I married a girl that I was fond of her in the marrying way. You see, a girl may be very sweet, and nice, and all that sort of thing, but unless you feel that you *must* marry her, I think there's a very good chance of the marriage turning out unhappily.'

'I suppose there is,' said John, rubbing his chin reflectively. 'All the same, when you've known a girl all your life, it's a bit rough——'

'Oh,' cried Philippa, approaching him in her anxiety and laying a hand on his sleeve, 'don't think, for a moment, that I'm trying to make further trouble between you and Charity. Anybody can see how fond you are of her, and if I were the cause of your separating I should never

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forgive myself, never! As it is, I feel perfectly dreadful about it!'

'I don't see why you should. It 's not your fault.'

'I oughtn't to have let you kiss me.'

'You couldn't have helped it,' said John, thrilling with the pride of conquest.

Philippa sighed. 'What awful creatures you men are!'

His hand returned to her shoulder. He gave a nervous little laugh.

'You shouldn't be so nice, then.'

'Nice!' How she loathed the word! Could she possibly marry a man who called her 'nice'? Philippa had no doubts now that she might marry him if she cared to do so. The game was getting more intricate and more exciting every day. She would need all her skill to play the cards in her hand to the greatest advantage.

'Penny for your thoughts,' said John. The idea of kissing her in broad daylight made him tremble a little.

'I was thinking how difficult everything is—how hard it is to go through the world without being cruel to somebody, however anxious one may be to help them and be kind to them.'

'You're a good-hearted little girl,' said John, much touched. Then, for the second time, he stooped and kissed her.

Philippa cried.

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CHAPTER XIX

TRISS PALINS was a little bundle of nerves, just as her dead mother had been. The loss of her mother, her father's drunken violence, and weeks of semi-starvation had seriously affected the child's health. It made Charity's heart ache when she undressed her to see how frail and thin she was.

To Triss's huge delight, a bed was made up for her in a corner of Charity's room. Charity had given Mrs. Lilley instructions to that effect the moment she heard that the father had been sent to gaol, intending, further, to sleep in the room herself and take care of her little visitor. Her motive was purely unselfish; none the less, she was not at all sorry to have a reasonable excuse for escaping the incessant company of Philippa.

After her interview with John, she felt that the advent of Triss had been almost providential. She was neither angry with her cousin nor jealous of her, but there was no forgetting that Philippa had concealed the fact of John's amorous overture. Such being the case, Charity could never be the first to speak of what she had learned; it was equally impossible for her to share her cousin's room now that this barrier of reserve had arisen between them.

It was Philippa's turn, then, to move next, nor

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was she very long in deciding on her course of action. That very night, when the house was quiet, she stole along the passage to Charity's room. Finding that a light was still burning, she tapped gently at the door.

'Come in,' said Charity.

She was sitting at her little table, writing in the Confidence-Book. On Philippa's entrance, she closed the book and put it away.

'May I come in for one moment, dear?'

'Yes, but don't speak too loudly because Triss is asleep.'

'Poor little thing! It's very sweet and good of you to have her in here. But it's just like you, Charity. You're much too good to everybody, you know. You ought to think more of yourself—you really ought.'

Charity waited. She found the prelude rather trying, and hoped that it would soon be over.

'Of course,' Philippa went on, seating herself upon Charity's bed, 'you will guess what I have come to speak to you about. I hope you won't think I'm taking a liberty, Charity, but don't you think that you have acted rather hastily?'

'In what connection?'

'About Mr. Cogbill. He told me—in the strictest confidence, of course—that you had broken off your engagement with him.'

(Neither of them noticed a slight movement in the little bed in the corner. Triss was waking.)

'That is quite true.'

'And he told me the reason, poor fellow. I should never have believed that you could have taken a little thing like that so seriously.'

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'Do you call it a little thing for a man to make love to one girl when he is engaged to be married to another?'

'Oh, but I don't think you ought to say that he made love.'

'He kissed you, didn't he?'

(Triss was wide awake by this time.)

'Oh, yes, but I'm sure it was merely on impulse. That was why I couldn't be angry with him. As a matter of fact, I dismissed it from my mind almost immediately.'

'Do you mean that you forgot that he had kissed you?'

'I don't say I forgot, but I didn't let it worry me because I didn't take it seriously. Had I done so, of course, I should have come straight to you and told you about it. But that would only have made useless trouble, you see, dear. I'm sure you'll understand my position in the matter.'

'I think it would have been kinder,' said Charity gently, 'if you had told me at once. It isn't very nice to find out from a third person that a man——'

She did not finish the sentence, but, turning, looked out of the open window. The boom-boom of the old clock, telling the hour of midnight, came floating gently upwards from the village.

'I'm sure you're wrong, dear, but, if you like, I am quite willing to leave by the first train in the morning. I can stay at a hotel for a few days until I've made other arrangements.'

'That's out of the question. You know that I should never dream of allowing you to go. Besides, why should you? I lay no claim to him.

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He couldn't have been in love with me or he wouldn't have fallen in love with you. Your first suspicion, you see, was fully justified. He asked me to marry him because everybody expected it. Then he met you and— It's all quite simple. We needn't make any fuss.'

'I hope you don't think, Charity, dear, that it was any of my doing—that I encouraged him in any way? You don't think that, do you?'

'Oh, no. These things happen by themselves. We can't explain them or reason about them. That is why I take it seriously, because I understand what it means to him. He would not have kissed you merely on impulse, or just for the sake of flirting. I know him too well to think that. He is the dearest, simplest fellow breathing.'

'How you love him!' breathed Philippa softly.

Charity did not answer. She was longing for Philippa to go—longing to be alone with the silence, and the soft darkness of the summer night, and her familiar belongings, and her thoughts, and the wise old comforter ticking away down in the valley. Love him? Yes, she loved him more to-night than she had ever loved him before. But only the Confidence-Book must know that. Least of all must he ever know it. The knowledge would spoil his happiness, and that was far, far dearer to her than her own.

'I suppose you would like me to go,' suggested Philippa.

She rose, and went across to her cousin.

'Good-night, dearest. Don't worry any more to-night. In the morning, everything will seem brighter. Things always do, you know.'

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'Good-night,' said Charity, submitting meekly to the kiss.

'I'm so glad you're not angry with me. You're not, are you?'

'Not a bit,' said Charity, smiling.

Philippa, feeling very clever and complacent, glided back to her own room, closed the window, and latched it firmly. Then she got into bed, lit a cigarette, and settled down to a quiet half-hour with her novel.

As for Charity, she put out the light and sat at the window, listening to the rustle of the trees. There is nothing nobler in this world, nothing that brings the poor human nearer to the angels, than the renunciation of self. On this day, Charity had achieved the greatest sacrifice possible to humanity; she had given up to another the man she loved in order that he might attain happiness.

Her prayers were very simple, yet very full. It seemed to her, as she rose from her knees, that she had laid her aching head on the bosom of Christ.

Triss was frightened. She had listened at first without realising the importance or the privacy of the conversation. Presently, when the meaning of the talk became clear to her, she felt, with all the strength of her little being, that Miss Charity, whom Triss loved better than anybody else in the world, had been badly treated. Yet she dared not speak lest she should have done wrong in waking.

She watched Charity as she wrote again in her book; she saw her put out the light; she waited,

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wakeful still, until she got into bed. A minute or two later, Triss raised herself on her elbow and spoke.

'Miss Charity!' she said.

No answer. Charity heard her, but hoped that the child was talking in her sleep.

'Miss Charity!' cried Triss again. 'O Miss Charity, you're crying!'

There was no restraining her now. She slipped swiftly out of bed, and the next moment her arms were round Charity's neck. Frail little arms, but strong with the agony of pity.

'Don't cry, Miss Charity! Please, please don't cry! I can't bear it!'

Boom!

Just another hour, according to the old clock: that is all.

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BOOK IV

THE ETERNAL WISDOM

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CHAPTER XX

NATURE, we know, is swift to avenge the lightest insult offered to her by man; yet, in return, she is often forced to provide a beautiful setting to an unworthy scene. It must have annoyed her excessively, for example, that the exquisite little glade in the covert appropriated by the nightingale should also have become the favourite trysting-place of Stuart Ackrill and Philippa.

Behold Master Stuart, this glorious afternoon in July, sprawled at the foot of a hollow oak, his purple socks nestling snugly against the cool, feathery moss. A smouldering cigarette sticks gracefully to his upper lip, and he is amusing himself by flicking at the ferns within reach with his gold-mounted cane.

Approaches, presently, Philippa, embodiment of all the outward graces. See how daintily she threads her way between the brambles and the branches! The afternoon sunlight, flickering slantwise through the trees, dances before her, and behind her, and on either side of her, a loving, attendant sprite. Sometimes it frolics for a moment in her hair, and anon, as she throws a gay little greeting to her swain at the foot of the oak, it even ventures to rest for one ecstatic moment on her lips. Oh, nothing could have been more in harmony with the silent beauty of the glade

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than the picture presented by the approaching Philippa.

Even Stuart, in whom, as yet, the artist was not very strongly developed, recognised that.

'By Jove,' was his greeting, 'you look beastly nice this afternoon!'

He did not rise, for they had reached the stage at which Stuart dispensed with such formalities—the stage, that is to say, when the lady was obviously compelled to seek his fascinating company.

'Thank you,' laughed Philippa, standing before him. 'I'm sorry I've looked so dowdy on the other afternoons.'

'You needn't fish,' retorted Stuart, unsticking the old cigarette and lighting a new one from it.

'I suppose you know you look very lazy, lying there?'

'I feel most rotten slack. Flappy kept me up till four o'clock this morning. Aren't you going to sit down?'

'What were you doing?' asked Philippa, selecting an effective spot, not quite close to him and yet not too far away. 'Playing billiards?'

'No. I don't think he could have seen a ball, and I'm sure I couldn't.'

'You're a very naughty boy,' said she, kindly. 'You know it's very bad for you to sit up so late and drink so much. Let me look at you.' They leaned a little nearer together, and she peered into his pasty, bloated young face. 'Yes, your eyes tell the tale. I wish you'd be more careful of yourself, Stuart. You promised me, you know, that you would be.'

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'Well,' he whined, 'what on earth else is there to do in a dead-and-alive hole like this? If it wasn't for you, I'd have been off weeks ago. I'm sick of Flappy, and the old man always did bore me to distraction. As for the people round about, I never met such a collection of rotters in my life. They dress and talk as if they'd just stepped out of the Ark, and there's hardly one of 'em got sixpence to bless himself with. They come and suck up to the old man because he's got the brass, and all the girls try to make themselves amiable to me for the same reason.'

'You wrong yourself,' said Philippa, smiling. 'Perhaps you imagine that I cultivate you because you're rich? Eh? Be frank, now!'

He knew it, of course, in his heart, but it would have spoilt the game to say so. Besides, vanity helped him to overlook it.

'Oh, no, I don't think that for a moment,' he replied. 'You're different, you see, from all those lumping clodhoppers. I expect you could have married scores of times, if you'd wanted to.'

Philippa stared into space, musing. She was smiling a little, and gave the impression of one recalling countless proposals. To be precise, she had never yet come within gripping distance of a definite suggestion.

'I shall never marry,' she said slowly.

'Same here,' said Stuart. 'It's a rotten institution.'

'I don't know that it's the institution that's rotten,' Philippa corrected him, 'so much as the men. My objection to marriage is that I have never yet met a man worth marrying.'

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'I suppose,' retorted Stuart, rather piqued, 'you want a blooming millionaire.'

'Oh, I wasn't thinking of money. I hate money. I hate the sight and the sound of it. I don't want to have anything to do with it.'

'Useful stuff, you know.'

'Useful, yes. But it sickens me that people should make a god of it, that they should sacrifice everything to getting money. I can't understand girls and women who marry for money. If they would only look a little deeper, they would see how foolish it is.'

Stuart was impressed. His countenance notwithstanding, he was barely two-and-twenty.

'What do you think, then, is the chief thing to look out for?'

'Sympathy,' said Philippa, without a moment's hesitation. 'That is to say, a similarity of tastes and dispositions. Can't you tell in a moment whether you are likely to "get on" with a person, or likely to clash? I can. And that's the safest guide. You won't go far wrong if you follow your first impressions.'

He looked at her intently. Yes, she was the kind of girl to do a man credit. He would like to trot her about and show her off in theatres and restaurants. They were much of the same disposition, too. He had taken to her from the moment of introduction. He remembered the hour on the lake after dinner.

One of her hands, idle and unsuspecting, lay near him on the moss. He put his own over it. Philippa made no objection. Indeed, she seemed quite unconscious of the action. This appealed to

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him. It was so like a barmaid to say, 'Oh, don't do that!' or 'You mustn't, really!' It was somewhat of a pleasing novelty to Stuart to discover that the barmaid was not the first and the last word in English femininity.

'You know,' he said, 'you've got a pretty good head on you.'

'D'you think so?' She turned, quietly, and looked at him.

'Yes. You've got a way of putting things that's quite simple and yet quite convincing. I suppose you've met a good many clever people, knocking about?'

'Yes. One meets most of those who are worth knowing. I'm very fond of intellectual society.'

'I wonder how you stick it in this hole, then!'

'You really mustn't be so modest.'

'Oh, well, I daresay I'm not so dull as most of 'em. In fact, I could have done pretty well at school and at Oxford if I had chosen to work. But what about the times when we're not together? I should think it's pretty deadly up at that mouldy old Vicarage, isn't it?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'One puts up with it.'

'The old parson's a bit cracked, isn't he?'

'Don't forget that you're speaking of my uncle, you naughty boy!'

'Go on! You don't mind! Nobody who wasn't cracked would go wheeling barrow-loads of earth about just for the fun of it. Time they gave him the chuck, in my opinion, and got some chap a bit smarter. Then there's your cousin—what's her name?'

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'Charity.'

'Yes; that's it. Gad!' He smacked his shoe with his cane and chuckled. 'I shall never forget the night she came to our place for dinner! What a sight she looked, and as nervous as a blooming kitten! One could hardly believe she was really your cousin! Why don't you take her in hand and polish her up a bit?'

'My dear boy, spare me! Besides, she's quite satisfied with herself as she is. She's much more likely to take *me* in hand.'

'Thundering shame you can't come and stay at our place. I must make the old man rake up a sister or something, and then it'll be all right. Would you come?'

She hesitated.

'Would you?' he persisted.

The grip on her hand tightened. She raised her eyes.

'Would you like me to?'

'Rather! You know jolly well I should. You'd like to, wouldn't you?'

'Yes—if you were there.'

'You bet I'd be there!'

His hand left hers, and travelled slowly up her arm until it was above the elbow. Then he pulled her towards him.

'May I kiss you?' he said.

To yield gracefully is infinitely more difficult than to resist. Philippa's yielding would have won praise from the most exacting stage manager.

For all that, the kiss was never actually achieved. At the very fraction of that second when their lips

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were about to meet, something struck Stuart a light blow on the nose. It was a little piece of bark.

Startled, they both drew back and looked up.

'Oh!' cried Philippa.

'Well, I'm ——!' said Stuart.

Seated in a fork of the tree, almost immediately over their heads, looking very small and terrified, was Triss Palins. She had climbed the oak, by way of the interior, in all innocence. Triss had discovered this fairy castle a week or two before, when rambling through the wood with Charity. Once discovered, it became, of course, her especial property, her enchanted palace.

When Stuart arrived, she had been absorbed in her book, and, when Philippa joined him, the child was afraid to let them know of her presence. She hoped they would go away without discovering her—as they certainly would have done had she not, in her agitation at the way in which they spoke of Miss Charity, and the cruel trick that Philippa was playing, let fall that unlucky piece of bark.

'What are you doing up there?' shouted Stuart, springing to his feet in a passion. 'Come down, d'you hear? How dare you be in this wood without leave!'

Triss, trembling all over, began to descend.

As soon as the child's head had disappeared within the trunk of the tree, Stuart and Philippa exchanged glances of dismay. At least, Philippa was dismayed, for she had recognised Triss. Stuart was bubbling over with a sense of outraged dignity. Never a very pleasant sight to behold,

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when he lost control of his temper he grew exceptionally ugly.

'She's living at the Vicarage,' said Philippa, quickly.

'At the Vicarage?'

'Yes. She's a pet of Charity's. Her father is in gaol, and we're taking care of her till he comes out.'

'Great Scott! D'you think she heard what we were saying?'

'Of course; every word. And saw, as well.'

'There was nothing to see.'

'Quite enough.'

'Does it matter?'

'Yes! I wouldn't have them know for worlds that—Oh, you don't know them. I do, and, for the time being, I've got to live with them.'

'We must frighten the kid into keeping quiet.'

'Leave her to me; will you?'

'Think you can manage it?'

'I think so.'

Poor little Triss's face was very white when she crept through the door of her enchanted castle.

'Hallo, Triss!' said Philippa, in a kind tone. 'Been having a nice game?'

'I—didn't mean to listen,' faltered the child. 'Indeed I didn't, Miss Philippa.'

'No, no, of course not. Come this way, dear, will you? I want to speak to you a moment.'

'D'you hear?' Stuart struck in. 'The lady wishes to speak to you.'

'Yes, sir,' said Triss.

Philippa walked twenty yards down the glade, Triss following.

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'Now,' she said, 'you needn't look so frightened, Triss. Nothing will happen to you, and nobody will be angry with you if you'll only tell me the truth.'

'Yes, Miss Philippa.'

'Why were you hiding in that tree?'

'I wasn't hiding, Miss Philippa. I've been up there three or four times lately. Miss Charity said I might go up.'

'Oh, Miss Charity gave you leave, did she?'

'Yes, Miss Philippa.'

'Did you ask her if you might climb the tree, or did she suggest it to you?'

'I asked her, Miss Philippa. We were walking through the wood, and I noticed that the tree was all hollow inside, and I got inside, just for fun, and then I said I should like it to be my little—my little fairy house, Miss Philippa.'

'How long had you been there before that gentleman arrived?'

'I don't know. I was reading a story out of a book that Miss Charity lent me, and I was very excited in it, and I didn't know any one was there until I heard Mr. Ackrill speak.'

'How did you know it was Mr. Ackrill?'

'Because I've seen 'im in 'is moter. When 'e comes through the village, me an' the other children always run into the corners to get out of the dust.'

'I see. Well, when you knew we were there, why didn't you speak or come down from the tree? Why did you keep quite quiet, listening to what we were saying?'

'I didn't know what to do at first, Miss Philippa.

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I thought Mr. Ackrill might be angry with me, because all the folks say that he flies into such rages. And I thought you'd both be walking on presently, and then I could get down.'

'Now, listen to me, Triss. It won't do you a bit of good to tell a lot of naughty stories. Somebody told you to go and sit in that tree and spy on us.'

'Oh, no, Miss Philippa, that they never! They didn't indeed, Miss Philippa! I wouldn't do such a thing, indeed I wouldn't!'

She clasped her thin little hands together, and spoke with almost passionate vehemence.

'Anyway, whether you were there purposely or not, you overheard our conversation. You can't deny that, Triss.'

'No, Miss Philippa, I couldn't help hearing it.'

'Don't you know that it's a very mean and a very disgraceful thing to do? Don't you know that everybody despises little girls who listen to private conversations, and that nobody loves them or trusts them afterwards? Don't you know that, Triss?'

'Ye—es, Miss Philippa.'

'You wouldn't like me to tell everybody—Miss Charity, and Mr. Couchman, and Mrs. Lilley, and all the people in the village—what you did, would you?'

'No,' said Triss. 'Except,' she added thoughtfully and slowly, 'Miss Charity.'

Philippa pricked up her ears.

'Oh! So you wouldn't mind Miss Charity knowing? You don't want Miss Charity to despise you, do you?'

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'I don't think she would despise me, because she'd believe that it wasn't my fault.'

'That's nonsense, Triss. Of course it was your fault, and Miss Charity would be the first to say so. She would turn you out of the Vicarage, and never be kind to you any more.'

Triss shook her head. 'She wouldn't,' she said with conviction.

Philippa began to lose her temper.

'Don't contradict me, Triss, or I may have to have you punished after all. I know what Miss Charity would think of your conduct far better than you do.'

'Well,' said Triss, her lower lip trembling ominously, 'I can't help it.'

'What d'you mean?'

Philippa's tone was so sharp that the words reached Stuart quite distinctly. He strolled a little nearer. The bully was surging up in him.

'I shall 'ave to tell 'er,' said Triss.

'Tell her what? Stop crying, you little idiot, and speak up.' Philippa spoke hurriedly, fearful lest the child should let slip something that Stuart must not hear.

'I shall 'ave to tell 'er about you an' Mr. Ackrill, because then she can make it up with——'

'What's that?' Stuart strode forward, pale with anger. 'What's that she says?'

'Better leave her to me,' said Philippa, earnestly.

'I want to know what she said. The cheek of it —a common little beast like that!'

He seized Triss by the arm. The fumes of the overnight liquor, working in his brain, already

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suffering from many a previous debauch, rendered him almost incapable of self-control.

Triss did not scream. She simply kept her eyes, wide with fear, on his face.

'Now then, out with it!' stormed Stuart. 'What was that I heard you saying?'

'You're spoiling everything,' interrupted Philippa, irritably. 'If you'll only go away——'

'I won't go away!' He gave the child a savage shake. 'I mean to show these clods they can't treat me as they like! Come on, you snivelling little rat! What was it? The longer you keep me waiting, the worse it'll be for you!'

'I—I said that I should—should 'ave to tell Miss Charity.'

'Oh, you did, did you? Tell Miss Charity what? Out with it!'

'Can't you see,' protested Philippa, hastily, 'that the child's too frightened to know what she's saying?'

'Not she! That's the cunning of the dirty breed! I know 'em! What is it you're going to tell Miss Charity, eh? What is it?'

The frail form shook like a leaf in the wind beneath that cruel grip.

'About—about you and Miss Philippa.'

'Indeed! And what d'you propose to tell her about me and Miss Philippa? Speak up! What's the little yarn to be, eh?'

'Let her go,' pleaded Philippa, alarmed herself by this time. 'She won't say anything.'

'We'll make sure of that. Now, then! What are you going to tell her?'

'That you was—was makin' love.'

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'Oh, you are, are you?'

He let go of her so suddenly that the child reeled against a tree. Stuart raised his cane.

'No, no!' cried Philippa. But he heeded her no more than the breeze among the tree-tops.

'Then take that! And that!'

The cane sung as it swished through the air. The first blow fell upon her little trembling body. The second cut her across the face.

With a pitiful moan, she fell, swooning, among the fern and bramble.

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CHAPTER XXI

'You fool!' cried Philippa, thinking swiftly of the consequences to herself. She pushed past Stuart, and knelt down by the side of the child.

Master Ackrill was rather frightened, now, at his own handiwork.

'Serve her right!' he said. 'She's only shamming.'

'She's not. She's fainted. You'd better get some water, quick.'

Stuart looked about him, sulkily.

'There isn't any water. She'll be all right in a minute or two if you leave her alone.' He began to stroll down the glade in the direction of the gate.

'Where are you going?' called Philippa.

'Oh, I've had enough of this.'

'Come here! I want you.'

'What's the matter?' He tried to sound merely peevish, but there was undoubted fear in the tone.

'Look at her face.'

A weal, red and ugly, stretched from the mouth to the left ear, disfiguring the soft young cheek.

'Do you realise what you have done?' said Philippa, almost under her breath. 'She will bear that mark for months—perhaps all her life.

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There'll be an awful row about this. Half the county will hear of it.'

'Well,' he retorted, looking at her very intently, 'we know nothing about it.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Some tramp must have done it.'

They stared at each other, breathing hard. Then Philippa rose, and stood facing him.

'You mean that we are both to swear we had nothing to do with it?'

'Of course. It's only her word against ours.'

'But *I* didn't do it. *You* did. Why should I——?'

A nasty look crept over Stuart's face—a look that made him loathsome even in Philippa's eyes.

'If I'm in it,' he said, 'you'll be in it as well. I'll take care of that. And I can afford to pay, remember. You can't.'

She recognised in a moment that she was beaten. He would turn on her in sheer spite, and buy his own way out of the odium.

'But we can't leave her lying here,' she said, looking down again at the prostrate form of the child.

'She'll be all right. Every moment we stay here we run more risk. They'll miss her presently, and come down here to look for her.'

'And what are we to say when she tells them?'

'Will she tell them?'

'Yes. I'm certain of that.'

'Well, our stories must agree. I can get Flappy to swear I was playing billiards the whole afternoon. You must think of something for yourself. As for the kid, it's all a delusion. We shall have to lie all we know.'

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And they parted on that understanding.

For the space of some five minutes, nothing stirred in the wood. And then, from out the undergrowth on the far side of the oak, there crept a lanky, shambling youth with a cunning grin upon his face. It was Crazy Jim.

He remained at first upon his hands and knees listening. At last he rose to his feet and shuffled, in a stooping posture, towards the spot where Triss lay. At the sight of the scar on her face he drew back a pace, rubbing his rough hands one against the other, slowly.

'My,' said Crazy Jim to himself, ''e copped 'er one that time, an' no mistake.'

He stood quite still, rubbing his hands and wondering what to do. There was a right thing to do and a wrong thing to do; he knew that. The right thing was to take the child up in his arms and carry her to the Vicarage. The wrong thing was to sneak off just as the others had done, and so make sure of keeping himself out of the scrape.

'I never done it,' he muttered, drawing back step by step. 'They'll say I did it if they see me with 'er, but I never. I wouldn't go fer ter do a thing like that.' Here he grinned again at the recollection of the slashing strokes. 'My, but 'e did cop 'er one, an' no mistake. I seed un cop 'er.'

Mrs. Lilley carried the tea-table into the garden. Philippa, very tired after one of her long, lonely walks, was resting in a deck-chair. Charity followed Mrs. Lilley with the tray. The Vicar, who had been over to Ullenhall to buy six stamps,

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called from an upper window that he would join them in a moment.

'I wonder where that child's got to,' said Mrs. Lilley, planting the table firmly on the turf. 'She seems to have a providential distaste for being in time for 'er tea. I suppose she didn't say where she was going, Miss Charity?'

'No, but I expect it's the wood. If she's not back by the time we've finished, I'll stroll down and bring her home. Come along, daddy! The tea's getting strong.'

'Do you think it safe,' said Philippa, carelessly, 'to let her ramble about in that place all by herself?'

'I don't see how she could come to any harm,' Charity replied, busy with the teapot.

'Of course, dear, you know best. But I've seen one or two very nasty-looking men hanging about there lately.'

'Oh, you must be mistaken, I think. This is a very quiet, peaceful spot, right away from the high road.'

None the less, Philippa's words made her feel uneasy. After tea, therefore, hearing that Triss was still absent, she made her way to the wood.

'Triss!' called Charity.

There was no answer. The spell of evening was slowly descending upon the wood. The sun had left the glade, and the nightingale was preparing for his evening anthem.

'Triss!' called Charity again. And then more loudly, with a nervous little catch in her voice, 'Triss! Triss, dear! Are you here, Triss?'

Silence. She peered into the trunk of the hollow oak and among the branches. No sign of——

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Yes! There, immediately above her head, was the child's sun-hat. She had taken it off and tied it by the ribbons to a branch of the tree. But why had she left it there? And why had she not come home? Was it possible that some harm had really come to her?

With fast-beating heart, Charity began to look this way and that, vaguely, searching for something indefinite, some possible sign or trace.—And so it was that she found her.

In an instant she was down on her knees, clasping the little form to her breast.

'Oh, my dear, my dear,' she moaned, 'what have they done to you? Oh, you poor little thing—your poor little face! Why wasn't I here? Triss, dear!'

She tried to raise the child in her arms, but had not strength enough, slight as was the burden. She must run for help. Her own home was the nearest house.

She was through the hedge in a minute, caring nothing for the thorns that tore her face and hands. Across the paddock at racing speed, and into the study through the open window.

'Come, daddy, come quickly! It's Triss! I've found her! They've tried to kill her!'

Philippa, waiting for news behind the locked door of her bedroom, saw them hurry away, old Mr. Couchman running as he had not run for many a year. And she saw them return, the still unconscious child held safely in those strong arms.

She heard them bring her upstairs, and she heard Mrs. Lilley's lamentations. She knew that the Vicar had gone for the doctor, and, with a

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sudden, horrible sensation of sinking, she wondered if Triss had died in the wood.

She could not bear the suspense longer; she must see for herself.

The door of Charity's bedroom was shut. Philippa tapped gently. Mrs. Lilley opened it.

'Yes?' she said, shortly.

'Is anything the matter? Can I be of any use?'

'No,' said Mrs. Lilley, and she shut the door again.

There was nothing to do, therefore, but wait for the coming of the doctor—and concoct her lies.

Triss was light-headed when they restored her to consciousness, and it was out of the question to expect to glean any story from her that night. Tom King, the constable, was sent for, and stood, helmet in hand, whilst Charity told him how she had found Triss in the wood. After that, the honest fellow tramped over to Ullenhall and reported the affair, as well as he could remember it, at headquarters. The Ullenhall sergeant of police, with tremendous energy, sent out and arrested a tired tramp. The tramp was detained on suspicion whilst the sergeant and Constable King went to look at the scene of the outrage. Constable King climbed the tree and brought down Triss's hat. This the sergeant took into his personal custody, and saw that it was safely and securely locked away.

In the meantime, nothing else was talked about in Littleworth, and very little else in Ullenhall. The 'King's Arms' did a roaring trade, and there was much speculation as to what Triss's father would do in the matter when released, in two

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days' time, from Warwick gaol. The general impression seemed to be that it would take the form of thumping somebody.

Crazy Jim moved from group to group, listening to all that was said, and rubbing his hands together with satisfaction. They called him silly, and yet he was the only person in the whole village who could, if he liked, throw light upon the mystery. Look at great Tom King there, in his helmet and tunic! Much good it was his talking, for all that he thought himself such a fine, clever man! Aha! Crazy Jim had the game to himself, and meant to make the most of it.

'And what 'ave you got ter grin about, pray?' asked Mrs. Bonehill, suddenly observing him.

Everybody in the group that Mrs. Bonehill was affecting for the moment looked at Crazy Jim.

The idiot's grin changed to a look of fear.

'I wasn't sayin' anything,' he replied.

'I didn't say you was,' Mrs. Bonehill persisted, scenting distinction. 'I said you was grinning, and so you was—in a nasty way, what's more.'

'You'd orter be ashamed of yerself,' was Mrs. Coppage's opinion. 'Makin' a joke of a pore little gal bein' more'n 'alf murdered, and 'avin' 'er face cut to ribbons! Maybe you know more about it than you'd care to say!'

Crazy Jim began to shake in his shoes. Perhaps they had seen him as he entered or left the wood!

'I never went nigh the wood!' he declared, trying to slink away.

Master Harry Bonehill was too quick for him.

'I knows you did, then, 'cause I seen yer meself goin' up that way!'

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'That 's a lie, 'Arry Bone'ill, and you knows it!'

'Look 'ere,' said Harry's mother, thrusting her face so close to the idiot's that he thought she was going to kiss him, 'don't you be so free with your name-calling! If you didn't go to the wood this arternoon, where was yer? Eh? Tell us that!'

'I was up at Nutlands, doin' a job o' stable-cleanin' fer Mr. Cogbill.'

This bold untruth staggered the group. They began to mutter among themselves, thus giving Crazy Jim the opportunity of slipping away. His appetite for secret glory being temporarily satisfied, he went home as quickly as possible, got into bed, and looked at the illustrations to *Robinson Crusoe* as long as the light lasted.

But Mrs. Bonehill made it her business to communicate her suspicions regarding Crazy Jim to Constable King. The constable nodded, reticently, and made a note in his pocket-book in large, round writing.

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CHAPTER XXII

THE gloom of Warwick gaol is one of the triumphs of man over Nature. On the prettiest day in April or the most golden day in August, the gaol still preserves the same forbidding demeanour. You may see it from the train as you journey from Warwick to Stratford-on-Avon. Sombre in colour, severely rectangular in shape, surrounded by a wall of sinister height, Warwick gaol is at once a menace and a moral tonic. You picture to yourself the unhappy scapegoats of a pastoral community languishing behind those hundreds of little half-moon windows. Then, with a shudder, you turn to the fair, smiling prospect on the other side of the line.

Fred Palins, you may be sure, wasted no time in staring at the exterior of the gaol. For one thing, he knew it by heart, every brick and tile of it. For another, he had just been told by the Governor that his daughter had met with an accident. Not a serious accident, Mr. Couchman's letter explained, but of such a nature that she must be kept free from all excitement for several days. She was being nursed at the Vicarage, and Palins was not to feel at all uneasy about her.

His dirty cap thrust well to the back of his head, and his short clay pipe between his teeth, Fred

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set out, patiently enough, to walk to Littleworth. Solitary cyclists and pedestrians, meeting him in the more lonely places, were careful to bear themselves without offence, and give him plenty of room. Fred, scowling as he trudged, paid little heed to them. His eyes were on the dusty roadway, and his huge shoulders, sulkily hunched, were expressive of his mood. To what was he returning? An empty cottage, from which he might even now have been ejected. A village in which he had neither a friend — save, perhaps, Miss Charity, and she was Triss's friend rather than his own — nor an employer. No money, and no chance of earning any; nothing to do but poach and pilfer and be sent back to gaol again.

The hum of a motor-car coming up behind him. The road was narrow, but Fred Palins would not budge an inch. The car thundered up, the horn toot-tooting like mad. Trudge, trudge—what did he care? Let them run into him if they dared! Now the car had slowed down and they were shouting at him. Get out of the way, eh? Not he! Let them squeeze past as best they could. These were the people who kept all the money to themselves, and made life a misery for poor folks. Not content with feasting while others starved, they must needs seize the very highways and hold them for their own, filling the cottages and the cottage-gardens with dust, driving the kiddies from their play, and even, when it suited them, running them down. Get out of the way? Not he!

The road widened a little, and the car managed to scrape past, two wheels almost in the ditch.

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There were two young men in it, the smaller of whom was driving. Palins recognised Stuart Ackrill and his friend.

'Now, then,' screamed Stuart, 'are you drunk, or deaf, or what?'

Fred clenched his great fist and shook it at them savagely. Stuart gave the car her head again before turning to threaten the insolent rascal with personal violence.

It was high noon by the time Fred reached the Vicarage. Weary and thirsty as he was, he had passed through the village without a pause. Mrs. Lilley told him to wait outside the back-door whilst she fetched Miss Charity. She paid him the compliment of closing the door. He shrugged his shoulders, and sat down on the bricks.

'Come in, Mr. Palins,' said Charity, for all the world as though he had just returned from a month at the seaside. 'You must be hot and tired after your long walk. Perhaps you would like a glass of beer and some bread and cheese?'

His sullen mood fell from him in a moment. He could only say, 'Thanks, Miss Charity,' and stare at his ragged old cap as he twirled it round and round.

Mrs. Lilley, after a glance of protest, which went quite unnoticed by Charity, drew the beer and placed the bread and cheese on the kitchen table. Charity found some excuse for dismissing her.

''Ow is she?' asked Fred. 'Can I see 'er?'

'Not to-day, I'm afraid. The doctor forbids it.'

'Is she as bad as that, then?'

'She's very weak, and rather light-headed. In fact, quite delirious at times. There's no danger, though, if we can keep her quiet for a few days.'

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'"Ow did it 'appen?'

'We don't quite know. She was missing at tea-time on Saturday afternoon, and I went down to the wood to look for her. She had taken a fancy to the place, and we always thought, of course, that she would be quite safe there, especially since it was so near the house. Well, whether she was climbing a tree and fell, or whether some tramp attacked her we cannot be sure at present. I found her lying at the foot of a tree in a swoon, with——'

Here Charity hesitated. She was afraid of rousing the man's passionate temper.

'With what?' Fred's hand tightened on his knife.

'With a scar across her face.'

'What sort of a scar? Like as if some one 'ad bin strikin' 'er?'

'That was my first impression, certainly, but she may have struck her face on a branch as she fell, you see.'

'Ain't she told yer nothing about it 'erself?'

'No. As I say, she's been delirious most of the time, and then it's quite possible that the shock has temporarily impaired her memory. Of course, we've been most careful not to question her.'

'Didn't she mention no names?'

'Oh, yes, a good many. But not in any sensible connection, so far as I could discover. We must be patient until she is stronger, and then we shall learn the whole story.'

'What's she doin' now? Can't I see 'er a moment? I shouldn't say anything nor make no noise, Miss Charity.'

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'She was asleep when I came down. If she's still asleep, you can go in for a moment and have a look at her. Wait here while I see.'

In less than a minute Charity returned with the news that Triss was still sleeping. Mr. Palins thrust his cap into his pocket, after dusting his boots with it, and followed Charity across the hall and up the stairs on tiptoe.

Outside the door, Charity paused.

'I must warn you that she looks very pale and ill. Don't be alarmed, though. And remember that the scar looks worse than it really is.'

She opened the door, very gently, and they went in. Triss was lying on her right side; Stuart's cane had struck the left cheek. The scar was a dull bluish colour now, and showed up with horrible distinctness against the deathly white little face. One hand, so thin that the knuckles stood out sharply, lay outside the coverlet.

The room was darkened. A cool, gentle breeze just stirred the curtains.

Fred Palins stood by the side of the bed and looked down upon his little daughter. And, first of all, as he noted how thin, and pale, and bruised she was, a sudden shooting pain passed through his heart, and he could not draw his breath save in short gasps. The tears rushed to his eyes, so that he was obliged at last to drag the old cap from his pocket and wipe them away. Charity crossed to the window and stood there, her back to the bed.

Then, just as swiftly, the man's mood changed. The lust of vengeance sprang up in him, stifling and beating down all gentler emotion. Why should this misfortune come upon a little

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innocent child? What had she done to deserve it? Was it the hand of God that dealt that blow —or the hand of man? He prayed that it might prove to be the latter, so that he could set himself to find the man, and stamp his life out beneath his feet. Yes, he would concentrate all his thoughts, all his hours, all his attention on that aim—to find and punish the man who had done this cruel thing.

The lust of murder was written plain upon his face when he turned, and Charity saw it there. Not a word did she speak, though, until they reached the garden. Then she turned and looked at him.

'Fred,' she said, softly, 'I want you to promise me something.'

'Well?' His tone was so deep and surly that it was almost like the growl of an animal.

'Should it turn out that that blow was not an accident, I want you to promise to come straight to me before you take any action. Will you promise me that, as Triss's friend? It s for her sake as much as your own that I ask it.'

He drew a long breath.

'No,' he said. 'If that there blow wasn't an accident, I'll find the man or the woman as dealt it—I don't care which it is—an' I'll do the same by 'im with all the strength as God's give me, and a thousand times more! I'll smash and smash the dirty cur until there's not a bit of 'im as any one can reco'nise! That's what I'll do, and they can string me up for it if they like! 'E'll go first, that's one thing, and 'e's a worse man than what I am, let them say what they may!'

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His great chest heaved with the violence of his emotion, and his hands clutched the top rail of the gate as though he would snap it like a twig.

Charity waited until he had finished. Then she laid her hand on his dusty sleeve.

'Fred,' she said, 'listen to me a moment. A little while ago, you did something for me. I want to thank you for it with all my heart. I know everything that happened, and I know that you got yourself into trouble for my sake. I shall never forget that act of kindness as long as I live. It has made me understand you better, and compelled me to look upon you as a friend. You see, Fred, I have my troubles just as you have yours, but is that any reason why we should turn and rend the world—why we should do something to bring sorrow upon those who have always loved us and have never injured us? Just consider for a moment what Triss's life would be when she grows up if you did as you say you will. Everybody would know her as the daughter of a murderer. Can't you see how that would blight her life? Can't you see that she would be ashamed to meet the eyes of her fellow-men? I know all that you feel. I know that the *helplessness* of us is almost more than we can bear. But we must bear it, Fred; somehow or another, we must bear it—for the sake of others. And there's some comfort, some beauty in the bearing of it for others. You'll find it out some day, perhaps, if you give me that promise. And you will give it me, won't you?'

He had turned away.

'What's the good?' he muttered. 'If I promised, like as not I should only break my word.'

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'But I'm not asking you to promise much, Fred —only to come to me before you do anything. Can't you promise me that, just for Triss's sake?'

He swung round, filled with sudden suspicion.

'You don't know nothing, do yer?'

'Nothing whatever. Am I to have that promise?'

She held out her hand. He looked at it, wondering and abashed. And then at last, having wiped his own upon his trousers, he gave her an awkward grip.

'I want you to say it, Fred.'

'I—I promise.'

'And now there's something else.' She was so pleased with her victory, and the reaction after the tension of those few moments was so strong, that Charity gave a half-chuckle. 'I want you to promise me to be very good until I see you again.'

'You mean the drink?'

'Yes. I'm not asking you to give it up altogether, but be sensible about it. It's such nonsense for a fine big fellow like you to make himself all fuddled, and silly, and quarrelsome by drinking a lot of beer. Come, now!'

'All right,' said Fred.

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CHAPTER XXIII

THAT night, as Charity was sitting at her little table, recording the events of the day in the Confidence-Book, Triss suddenly spoke to her. The child's voice was weak, but the intonation was rational.

'Miss Charity,' said Triss.

Charity rose at once, and went across to her.

'Have I been ill?'

'Yes, dear, a little.'

'How long have I been ill?'

'Oh, only a day or two. Don't worry about it now. I'll give you something nice to drink and then you must drop off to sleep again.'

Triss watched her contentedly as she moved about the room. Presently, though, Charity was startled to hear a frightened cry from the bed. Triss had touched the scar on her cheek with her fingers.

'What's the matter with my face? What have they done to me?'

She sat up in bed, staring wildly. Charity put her arms about her, soothing the child with caresses and quiet words.

'It's nothing, dear. Only a little scratch that will soon be quite well. You haven't anything to be frightened about. You don't think any harm

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can come to you as long as you're with me, do you?'

'But how did it happen? I don't understand. May I see meself in the glass, please?'

'Not now, dear, because I want you to keep quiet and get off to sleep again. We want you to get well quickly, and you won't do that unless you do exactly as I tell you.'

Triss lay down, but Charity could see that her little brain was working. She dreaded another attack of delirium.

'Ah!' Triss was up on her elbow again. 'I know now! I remember! 'Twas in the wood!'

'Yes, dear, yes, but I shall have to be cross with you if you get excited. You can tell me all about it in the morning.'

'But I want to tell you now, Miss Charity. I shall never get to sleep unless I tell you. I won't get excited—really I won't.'

The child was so very much in earnest that Charity decided to let her have her way.

'Very well, then. But you must take some of this first.'

'Have you,' asked Triss, timidly, between sips, 'made it up with Mr. Cogbill, Miss Charity?'

'What d'you mean, dear? I've had no quarrel with Mr. Cogbill.'

'No, but you was goin' ter give 'im up to Miss Philippa. I was awake that night when you was talking, and I couldn't help hearing. But she won't want 'im now she's in love with young Mr. Ackrill.'

This was no delirious babbling. Triss was speaking quite quietly, and her eyes were perfectly sane.

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'You mustn't repeat gossip, dear.' Nevertheless, Charity was hard put to it to restrain her own agitation.

'It isn't gossip, Miss Charity. I told them I should tell you and I 'ave. That was why——' She paused, staring at Charity. 'Oh! Then that's what the place on my cheek's from!'

A shudder ran through her. She lay back on the pillow, her eyes closed.

'Don't think anything more about it to-night, Triss.' But Charity knew, before she spoke, that the expostulation was useless.

'I was in the old oak tree,' said Triss, recalling each incident as she told her tale, 'and I heard Miss Philippa speaking, and I looked down, and there she was with young Mr. Ackrill. And they began talkin' about you an' laughin'. An' I was so angry I didn't know what to do. An' presently I knocked a bit of something off of the tree, and then they found out I was there, an' told me to come down. An' Miss Philippa tried to make me promise as I wouldn't say anything about what I'd 'eard, and about them kissing, and——'

'Are you—are you sure they were kissing, Triss?' Charity's voice trembled as she put the question. So much hung upon the answer.

'They was just goin' to when I knocked the bit of stick off the tree.'

'You're quite sure?'

'Certain positive, Miss Charity. And I was glad of that, because I knew then that she wouldn't take Mr. Cogbill after all, an' then, when I wouldn't promise not to say anything, young Mr. Ackrill got

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into ever such a passion an' came at me with 'is stick, and—and that 's all I remember.'

Charity's muscles stiffened, and her face, usually so soft and gentle, took on a very different expression.

'Do you mean to say, Triss, that he—that he hit you across the face with his stick?'

'Yes,' said Triss, simply. 'I remember it all now. But I don't care, because they couldn't make me promise not to say anything.'

An angel, maybe, might have heard this story and still found forgiveness for the offenders. But Charity was not an angel. She was a human being with a warm heart and quick sympathies. Her blood boiled within her as she conjured up the scene in her imagination, and, had Fred Palins presented himself at that moment, it is doubtful whether she would have been able to urge upon him the duty of forbearance.

And Philippa! She had been a witness, even an abettor, of this horrible cruelty. She had left this frail little child lying senseless in the wood, and had sat at the tea-table, chatting on indifferent matters with a smiling face. The double game that she had evidently been playing with regard to John and Stuart Ackrill was nothing compared to this selfishness and inhumanity. Had the hour not been so late, Charity would have gone to her room straightway, and challenged her to deny the truth of Triss's tale. As it was, they should both answer for their conduct on the morrow; on that point Charity was fully determined.

'You're not angry with me for asking you about Mr. Cogbill, are you, Miss Charity?'

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'Angry with you?' She gathered the child in her arms and held her very close. 'No, you poor, poor little thing! How could I ever be angry with you again when you have gone through all this for me? Oh, if I could have been there, Triss! He shouldn't have hurt a hair of your head, my darling!'

'Still,' said Triss, 'it's all over now, isn't it?'

'Yes, dear, it's all over now. Put it out of your mind for ever.'

'Shall I have a mark on my face all my life?'

'No, no,' said Charity, quickly. What else could she say, despite the doctor's prediction?

'I'm so glad,' said Triss, happily. And she fell asleep in Charity's arms.

'Why, my dear,' said Mr. Couchman, when Charity appeared at the breakfast-table next morning, 'how white and fagged you look! All this nursing is knocking you up. You ought to get somebody to share it with you.'

'I offered my humble services,' said Philippa, gaily, 'but they've been refused.'

Charity did not look at her cousin or respond to her. It was sufficiently trying to be in the same room with her on terms of apparent friendship.

'How is Triss this morning?' asked the Vicar. 'Was she very restless in the night?'

'No,' said Charity. 'She slept very well. She recovered consciousness about midnight.'

There came a sudden clatter from Philippa's side of the table. She had dropped her knife on to her plate.

'Dear me!' she said. 'How careless of me!'

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'Nerves?' said the Vicar, laughing. 'You ought to try a little digging. Nothing like it for the nerves.'

'Oh, my nerves are splendid, Uncle Walter. The knife slipped; that's all.'

The Vicar sipped his coffee with relish. Then an idea occurred to him.

'Did she give you any explanation of the accident?' he said to Charity.

Charity raised her eyes and met her cousin's. Philippa did not wince, but the blood had receded from her lips.

'Yes, father.'

'Indeed? What was it? How did it happen?'

'I'll tell you another time, if I may.'

'Too bad to keep us in suspense,' said Philippa. 'Isn't it, Uncle Walter?'

'I'm sure Charity has some very good reason for doing so. Well, to work, to work. That little drop of rain last night will have just made the earth nice and moist.'

He went out, leaving the girls alone.

Philippa rose.

'I've a whole heap of letters to write. Anything I can do for you first, Charity?'

'Yes.' Charity went over to the door and closed it. 'You can stay here and answer some questions that I wish to put to you.'

Philippa stared—and then laughed. 'Isn't this rather theatrical?' she said. 'You've no idea how tragic you look, my dear!'

'Why didn't you tell me that you were present when Triss was struck?'

'Why didn't I *what*? Are you out of your senses?'

'Please answer my question.'

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'I shall do nothing of the sort. I really think you've gone suddenly mad. Kindly stand aside. I wish to go to my room.'

'You will either answer my question, or the true story of the attack on that helpless little child shall become public property. At present, I am the only person who knows it besides those actually concerned.'

'Ah! I see what it is! Triss has been raving again, and you've been deceived into thinking that she was speaking sanely. All the same, it's simply monstrous that you——'

'I tell you that the child was absolutely sane and clear-headed last night when she told me the story. She would repeat it to-day, if I asked her, in practically the same words, and she *shall* repeat it, unless you're very careful, in a court of law!'

'My dear Charity, what on earth are you going on like this for? What are you accusing me of? Do you wish to insinuate that *I* struck Triss?'

'No, but you know who did. You were present when it was done.'

'What preposterous nonsense! I——'

'Why should she say so if it isn't true?'

'Either she dreamed it or you did. You've no right to make wild accusations of this sort. Or is it because you're so jealous of me that it's sent you out of your mind? Upon my word, you look almost like a madwoman at this moment, if you could only see yourself.'

'Then you refuse to say anything? Remember, it's your only chance of saving a public scandal. I'm determined to go through with this affair.'

Philippa thought quickly. Charity was practi-

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cally asking her to turn King's evidence, presumably with a view to getting handsome compensation for Triss out of Stuart or his father. But, if she gave Stuart away, neither he nor his father would have anything further to do with her, whereas, if she persisted in denying all knowledge of the matter, she cleared herself and there was only the statement of the child against them. And everybody knew that the child had been delirious for forty-eight hours.

'You must do,' she said, 'precisely as you please. Will you allow me to leave the room by the door, or is it your custom to compel your guests to climb out of the window?'

'I understand, then, that you deny the whole story?'

'I refuse to say another word about it. It's too utterly ridiculous to be worth discussing. When the doctor comes, I should advise you to get him to examine your brain.'

'Very well. I've given you your chance. Remember that. I daren't trust myself to say what I think of you. At any rate, if you have a spark of pride in you, you'll leave this house to-day.'

Philippa smiled sweetly as she opened the door.

'And leave you to win back the strayed affections of Mr. John Cogbill? Poor little Charity! What a simpleton you are! But I consider myself Uncle Walter's guest, unfortunately for you, and, so long as he chooses to have me here, I shall stay. See?'

She ran upstairs, laughing prettily. Charity, having told Mrs. Lilley to stay with Triss, caught up the first hat she could find, and set out, walking rapidly, for Ullenhall Castle.

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CHAPTER XXIV

SHE was not afraid this time. She passed through the big gates without even glancing at the Ackrill arms, so new and splendid. The long drive had no terrors for her. She would not have slackened her speed a whit though every window of the mansion had been filled with jeering faces. For, all the while, she kept before her the thought of that scene in the wood, and the memory of the long nights when Triss, so white and wasted, turned and tossed on her bed, babbling incoherently of vague terrors and threatenings.

The footman looked her up and down with some hauteur. He was not accustomed to finding young women on his doorstep whose shoes were covered with dust, and who breathed hard, as though with running. He was not sure whether Mr. Ackrill was at home, or, if at home, disengaged. Would it be Mr. Ackrill senior or Mr. Stuart Ackrill? Either would do? The footman took no pains now to conceal his suspicion. He was a new man, and the name of Couchman conveyed nothing to him. He bade Charity take a seat in the hall whilst he glided away over the soft rugs to make inquiries.

A queer, lonely little person she looked, all alone in the lofty, richly furnished hall. The place

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reeked of exotics. She could hear the 'plash' of the fountain in the conservatory. It occurred to her, suddenly, that the hour was still comparatively early—much too early for calling. Not that that mattered. If they were in bed, she would sit there and wait until they chose to come down.

The footman returned. Mr. Ackrill senior would see her in a few minutes. He showed her into the magnificent drawing-room, and closed the door so gently that it took him nearly a minute to do it. Charity did not sit this time. She walked to the window and looked out across the sunlit meadows and the gently swaying trees. All this would belong to him some day. He would have hundreds of people dependent upon him for their daily bread. He could bring happiness or misery into hundreds of humble homes. He could smooth the path of life for young lovers, or he could drive them from the neighbourhood by refusing them employment. He could lighten the eyes of the little children, and fill the air with their happy laughter; or he could make his name a synonym for greed, and cruelty, and injustice. Injustice! Yes, thought Charity; that was the hardest pill to swallow in this life—and the most common.

The door opened. She turned quickly. Mr. Ackrill came forward to greet her with outstretched hand and a pleasant smile. She felt sorry for the little man, but she could not spare him.

'Good morning, Miss Couchman. I see you're an early riser, like myself. Sit down, won't you?'

'Thank you. I'm afraid I've come on a very unpleasant errand, Mr. Ackrill.'

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He laughed, rubbing his hands.

'What is it this time? The Sunday-school treat, or the restoration of the church, or what? Come! I daresay we shall find a way out of the difficulty, eh?'

He really enjoyed giving away these little bits of money. Five or ten pounds, after all, meant nothing to him, and it counteracted the unpleasantness of having to turn some of the old folks who could not pay rent out of their cottages. Mr. Ackrill and his agent—a shrewd little fellow who had started life as an errand-boy in Mr. Ackrill's emporium—were running the estate on strict business lines. The peasantry, of course, did not like it, but money was money, and Parliamentary honours were dearly bought indeed if a man had to sacrifice a good slice of his rent-roll in order to retain his popularity. They would all 'come round' when they once grasped the fact that they were dealing with a man who expected twenty shillings for his sovereign and always saw that he got them.

'I'm afraid it isn't anything of that sort. Would you mind sending for your son?'

'Send for my son?'

The little draper stared. Charity's manner was strained and peculiar. What in the world had Stuart been up to, the young idiot?

'Yes, if you please. I would rather say what I have to say before his face than behind his back.'

'I don't suppose he's down yet. I'll inquire, if you like, but I should much prefer to know what you have to tell me whilst we are alone. It would be better, I think, for many reasons.'

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'Very well. You may have heard that, a few days ago, a little girl belonging to our village named Triss Palins was found in a dead faint in the wood at the bottom of our paddock, with a bad scar across her face that looked as though she had been struck with a stick?'

'Well?' Mr. Ackrill drew his brows together and looked keenly at Charity. The expression on his face was not pretty. Business men in Birmingham and Manchester who had tried to get the better of him in a deal knew that expression.

'Did you hear it?'

'I think I heard something about it, but I didn't pay much attention to the story.'

'I paid attention to it, Mr. Ackrill, because the child's father was in gaol and Triss was living in the meantime at the Vicarage. I have known the child all her life. She is a sweet-natured, gentle little thing, and absolutely truthful.'

'I'm glad to hear it. More than you could say, I fancy, for most of these cottage-folk. Well?'

'She accuses your son of having struck her with his stick.'

'*What?*' The little man jumped to his feet. He was frightened, and Charity could see it. Knowing that she could see it he tried to recover the lost ground by blustering. 'Have you come here, Miss Couchman, to repeat such a preposterous story as that? I'm simply amazed that you should be so foolish as to waste your time and my own on such absolutely nonsensical stuff! What can your father be thinking of to let you ramble about the country making such mischief! A nice story to circulate, upon my word! I don't want to be

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offensive, Miss Couchman, but I really think that you must be out of your mind!'

She waited quietly, until he had finished.

'There's nothing to be gained by rudeness, Mr. Ackrill.'

'Well, but—I beg your pardon, of course, but, upon my word, you ought to be more careful, Miss Couchman. Don't you know that my son could sue you for criminal libel?'

'Perhaps he could,' she said, 'but he won't.'

'I'm not so sure of that.'

'I'm perfectly sure of it. Send for him and ask him in my presence whether he dare sue me for libel.'

'Plenty of time for that. Let's discuss the matter calmly. Tell me, Miss Couchman, are you in earnest when you say that you believe this child's tale? How can she prove her story? What witnesses has she?'

'There was one witness.'

'Indeed?' Again that look of fear. 'And who was that, pray? Some other little brat from the village?'

'My cousin, Miss Secretan.'

'Your cousin! D'you mean to say that Miss Secretan pretends to have seen my son strike this child with his stick?'

'No; she denies it.'

'Ah!' There was a world of relief in the ejaculation. The little draper sat down again, crossed his fat legs, and regarded Charity with a tolerant smile. 'Really, Miss Couchman, you're a very remarkable young lady. You take the word of a common little village child, whose father is a gaol-

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bird, against that of your own cousin, and, with this evidence, you propose to bring a serious accusation against a gentleman holding a high position in the county. I had no idea you were so impulsive, so easily led! Now, let a man of the world, who is not so very much younger than your own father, give you a word of useful advice. Don't be too ready to mix yourself up in matters that don't concern you. I have no wish to quarrel, or hurt your feelings. But I ought to warn you that, if you go further in this matter, you are likely to land both yourself and your father in very serious difficulties. The law of libel is an awkward thing, Miss Couchman, and I advise you to beware of it. That's all I have to say. And now I wish you good morning.'

He rose. Charity remained seated.

'Will you kindly send for your son, Mr. Ackrill?'

For the second time, his temper got the better of him.

'What for, in the name of heaven? What d'you want with him? Haven't I proved to you that this miserable little brat has simply been fooling you, in all probability with the idea of blackmailing me? D'you think I can't see through the trick? Her father put her up to it, of course. I shouldn't wonder if he hit her himself and then devised this scheme for making money out of it! Why, the thing isn't worth talking about! Do, for goodness' sake, behave like a grown-up woman, Miss Couchman!'

'Is it possible that you're afraid to send for your son, Mr. Ackrill?'

'What d'you mean? Afraid? Not I! I'm

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afraid of nothing and nobody, Miss Couchman.' He crossed over to the bell and rang it. 'If you insist upon bothering the boy with this silly tale, you shall see him, by all means.' Then to the servant: 'Tell Mr. Stuart I wish to see him here at once.'

There was a long silence. Mr. Ackrill walked up and down the great drawing-room with short, impatient strides. Charity sat quite still, her eyes on the door. The old meek little self seemed to have slipped away from her. She was realising the fierce joy of a tough fight in a good cause.

At last Stuart entered. He looked pale, and very puffy beneath the eyes. The servant must have told him the name of the visitor, for the face that came round the door was both truculent and apprehensive.

'You know Miss Couchman, Stuart?'

''Morning.'

'Miss Couchman has come here with an extraordinary tale about——'

'Please!' Charity interrupted. 'I shall be obliged if you will allow me to speak for myself.'

The little draper bowed, sarcastically. 'With pleasure.'

'There is a child staying at our house,' said Charity, watching the boy's face all the time, 'named Triss Palins.'

'That's very interesting,' replied Stuart, grinning at his father. Mr. Ackrill laughed heartily at the excellent retort.

'On Saturday afternoon, I myself found her lying senseless in the wood at the bottom of our paddock. Somebody had struck her a savage blow

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across the face with a stick. She was delirious for many hours, only recovering consciousness last night. She then told me that you were the person that struck the blow.'

A faint, sickly smell of brandy stole through the room. Stuart had been fortifying himself for the ordeal.

'Indeed? That also is very interesting. I hope you gave her a good smacking for telling naughty stories?'

Oh, the humour of the lad! The little draper fairly stamped with gleeful appreciation.

'I believed every word she said, and I still believe it.'

'Some people can believe anything, you know. It's just a matter of will.'

'There was a third person present at the time,' continued Charity.

Stuart's sneering smile broke down for a moment at that. Had Philippa given him away? His father hastened to his assistance.

'Miss Couchman,' he explained, 'spares nobody, not even her own cousin. She will not accept Miss Secretan's denial. It seems that this brat's word is worth more than either Miss Secretan's or your own.'

'Is it worth while discussing the matter further?' said Stuart carelessly. 'If Miss Couchman will excuse me, I'll go and get some breakfast.'

They all rose, but Charity had not quite finished with him yet.

'One moment,' she said. 'I came here with the intention of doing the best I could in a very difficult situation. With the exception of my cousin,

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I have not mentioned the matter to anybody, even my father. I wanted to save a very ugly scandal, and I wanted to do something for Triss. Are you going to make it absolutely necessary for me to go to extreme measures?'

'It's absolutely necessary for me to get some breakfast,' said Stuart.

He moved towards the door. Charity followed him.

'Are you prepared to go into a court of law and deny on oath that you did this thing?'

'Quite, thank you,' said Stuart. And he left them.

Charity was staggered. Deliberate perjury was something outside her experience. The thought of it took away her breath.

'You see,' said Mr. Ackrill, swift to take advantage of her discomfiture, 'you have made a very grave mistake, Miss Couchman. No doubt you acted on impulse in coming here, but let it be a lesson to you. Speaking for myself, I shall not cherish any grievance against you, and I shall try to persuade my son to put the affair out of his mind. In a day or two, perhaps, when you have had time to think things over, you will send him a little note withdrawing entirely this preposterous charge.'

'I shall do nothing of the kind,' said Charity, looking him steadily in the eyes. 'I know that your son is guilty, Mr. Ackrill, and I will not rest until I have brought the crime home to him. And, as sure as there is a God in heaven, He will help me. If you could see that child's face, and hear her tell her pitiful story——! Well, she must

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tell it publicly now. I wanted to avoid that, but, after all, perhaps it is the strictest justice. Your son would not feel a mere monetary payment; he will feel the shame of public disgrace.'

She spoke so earnestly that Mr. Ackrill knew she would carry out her programme, cost what it might. The spirit of martyrdom will never die so long as there is a woman left in the world. The Couchmans were well known in the district and greatly respected. Even though the case fell to the ground, as of course it would, the story would cling for years to the name of Ackrill.

'Now, look here,' he said. 'I'm not a hard man, Miss Couchman. I like your father, and I like your cousin, and I should like you if you would allow me to do so. And I want to save you from yourself, and save your father the worry and expense that must ensue if you persist in publishing this extraordinary tale. The first thing that a magistrate or jury would look for is motive. What earthly motive could my son have in striking that child? Have you given that a moment's thought?'

'Yes.'

'Oh! May one ask what it is?'

'Triss had accidentally discovered something that he did not wish known. He tried to make her promise to keep it to herself, but she refused to do so. Then he lost his temper and struck her.'

Mr. Ackrill stared, wondering.

'Something that he did not wish known?' he repeated. 'What on earth could a child like that know against my son?'

Charity was loth, even then, to sacrifice Philippa. Yet she remembered that Philippa

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had sacrificed poor little Triss, and her tender heart hardened.

'He has been carrying on a clandestine flirtation with Miss Secretan.'

The little draper gaped. Why, it was only two or three days ago that Philippa had told him, with the most charming sigh and the most bewildering look in the world, that she could never love and respect any man who was not a good deal older than herself. Indeed, he would probably have proposed to her then and there had not the telephone suddenly interrupted the conversation.

'How—how did she know that?' he asked.

'Triss was in a tree—a favourite playing-place of hers. She overheard them by accident. In fact, they were on the point of kissing when she disturbed them.'

'This is a very strange story.' He walked to the window and back again. Charity had touched him on a tender spot—his vanity. Had that girl really been laughing at him all the time?

A new thought struck him.

'Even supposing,' he said, 'that the child saw what you say, Miss Couchman, why should she refuse to hold her tongue about it? That's what I don't understand.'

'Because,' said Charity, steeling herself to reveal even this, 'Triss knew that I had broken off my engagement to Mr. John Cogbill, of Nutlands Farm, believing him to be in love with my cousin, and she with him. Triss is very, very fond of me, and the child thought, quite innocently, that she had found a way of making things come right for me. That was why she refused to promise to

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hold her tongue. She sacrificed herself for me, and I will never rest until I have paid back the debt. Now you know everything, Mr. Ackrill.'

'Yes.' Charity noted, hopefully, that his manner had changed. 'Will you wait here a moment, Miss Couchman?'

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CHAPTER XXV

MR. ACKRILL went straight to his study and rang the bell.

'Tell Mr. Stuart I wish to speak to him at once.'

'Yes, sir.' The man retired, but came back almost immediately. 'If you please, sir, Mr. Stuart told me to say that he was just having his breakfast and would be with you in about ten minutes.'

The little man glared. He was not enjoying his morning.

'Tell him that I wish to see him here *at once*!'

'Very good, sir.'

Stuart showed his annoyance by coming into the study with his mouth full.

'I say,' he complained peevishly, 'you needn't make me look such an ass before the servants!'

'You'll look something worse than an ass,' retorted his father grimly, 'if you don't take care. Shut the door and sit down. Now, then. This girl is going to make trouble.'

'Scott! D'you mean to say she's still on the premises?'

'She's very much on the premises. She says that you've been carrying on a clandestine flirtation with Miss Secretan.'

Stuart was prepared for this. He laughed so heartily that he coughed.

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'That's good, upon my soul! Fancy my flirting with a silly little minx like that! Give us a chance!'

This answer, oddly enough, was not wholly pleasing to the draper.

'That's nonsense!' he said sharply. 'The girl's very pretty and very smart. If you've been flirting with her, say so like a man.'

'I tell you I shouldn't dream of flirting with her. We may have met once or twice, by accident. People in places like this always gossip if they see a man and a girl talking together for five minutes. You must know that.'

'Did you ever meet her in the wood near Littleworth Vicarage?'

'Never in my life.'

'Are you sure? You know the wood I mean?'

'On my word of honour. I've never even been in the wood in my life.'

'H'm. That's very extraordinary. There's nobody about here, I suppose, who could be mistaken for you?'

Stuart looked complacently at his green and cerise socks.

'There may be,' he said generously. 'These country folks make awful mistakes, you know.'

'Did you know that Miss Secretan is supposed to be going to marry John Cogbill, the farmer?'

'Eh?'

'You heard what I said. The announcement seems to have some especial interest for you.'

'No, but— Isn't that the great lumping chap one sees about on horseback?'

'That's the one. I remember, the first day I

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settled in here, I ran over one of his hens. An ill-bred rascal.'

'So I should think. Why, she's made fun of him to me scores of times.'

His father was down upon him like a flash.

'I thought you'd only met once or twice, by accident?'

'What? Oh, you know what I mean. One gets into this silly habit of exaggerating. Anyway, I know that she thinks him a great joke. Who told you that she was engaged to him?'

'Miss Couchman. She herself was engaged to him, and gave him up to her cousin.'

Stuart whistled reflectively. 'Then that explains everything,' he said.

'Does it? Perhaps you'll enlighten me, since you're so clever.'

'Why, don't you see, this Couchman girl wants to get back on her cousin for cutting her out. And so she's trumped up this story.'

'But why should she drag you into it?'

'Well, there had to be some man in it, I suppose. A girl never invents a story about another girl without a man in it.'

'Now, look here, Stuart, whether you did this or whether you didn't——'

'Haven't I told you over and over again,' cried the boy, feigning anger, 'that I've never been inside the beastly wood in my life?'

'It's no use losing your temper with me, sir, or even pretending to lose it. I know you better than most people, remember. What I was going to say was this: whether you did it or whether you didn't, I'll stand by you. It's not altogether

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your fault that you've got a vile temper; I'm not the most even-tempered man myself, and your poor mother lashed herself into such absurd passions about nothing that her strength gave out. Besides, for my own sake, I don't want a scandal. If Miss Couchman has got hold of the wrong end of the stick, she may burn her fingers, and welcome. If she hasn't, if you think there's any chance of her being able to prove this against you, for Heaven's sake tell me straight out now, my lad, and we'll square it up before she leaves the house. She's a good-natured little soul; you can see that. I'm sure she's only trying to do the child a good turn, and we may as well have the credit of doing a charitable act. Now, then: am I to pack her out of the house and tell her to do her worst, or am I to write a cheque?'

'When a chap gives his word of honour——' said Stuart.

'That's all right, my boy,' replied the elder Ackrill cheerily. 'There are times to tell the truth and times to — compromise. "Word of honour" is just a phrase in business, and sometimes a jolly useful one. Come! I'm not asking for your word of honour; I want the truth as between partners who are pulling together for their own interests.'

During the exposition of this charming little code, Stuart had rapidly considered the situation. Philippa, it was pretty clear, had fooled him. She had been playing a double game and was not to be trusted as a fellow-conspirator. Supposing the case came into court, she might go back on him, if it suited her book. On the other hand, if the old

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man stumped up, the business would be done with for good and all.

'Father,' he said slowly, 'I admit it.'

'Good Lord!' The draper was shocked, and not a little disgusted, to find his slight suspicion confirmed. This was a shattering blow at the pride that he had obstinately nourished, in spite of many disillusions, in his only child.

'Of course I'm frightfully sorry now. It was Miss Secretan's fault more than mine. The kid was rude to her, and she asked me to speak to her about it, and then I lost my temper and hit out a bit with my cane. I'll swear I never meant to hurt her.'

'You fool!' The elder Ackrill sat back in his chair; all the fight seemed to have gone out of him. 'Why in the name of goodness didn't you come straight to me and tell me about it? Did you think you could lie your way out of this because you have lied your way out of other things? You miserable young idiot! Just think of the fuss there'd have been! Think of the papers! Where would my chances of getting into Parliament have been? Why, in all probability, I should have had to give this place up altogether; and think of the money I've spent on it! Phew!'

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead.

'It's no good going on like that,' muttered Stuart. 'Most men get into scrapes of some sort or another when they're young.' He spoke as though he had pulled a knocker off a door, or run away with a policeman's helmet.

'There are scrapes *and* scrapes. People will for-

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give you certain things, and they won't forgive you others. This is the sort of thing that nobody would ever forgive, and you know it. Besides, you've arrived at a responsible age. When I was your age, I'd been earning money for eight years and——'

'Oh, we know all about that.'

'Do you? Then don't forget it. I warn you, my lad, this is the last time I stand by you.'

Stuart smirked. That, too, he had heard before.

'The best thing you can do now,' his father continued, 'is to come with me into the drawing-room, make a clean breast of it all to Miss Couchman, beg her pardon, and ask her not to give you away. She's the sort of girl, as I say, that you can get round if you go the right way about it. Come along.'

He rose, and stumped towards the door. Stuart budged never an inch.

'Not I,' he said.

'Eh?' Mr. Ackrill turned on him angrily.

'I'm not going to eat dirt.'

'But can't you see, you young idiot, that my signature to the cheque is tantamount to your pleading guilty?'

'I don't care. I'm not going to eat dirt.'

'I'm to do that for you, I suppose?'

'Just as you like.' Stuart took a cigarette from his case, shut the case with a defiant snap, and slipped it into his pocket. He knew that his father's affection for him was the weak spot in the old man's armour.

'Pretty cool, upon my word! And if I decline to do it—what then?'

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'You needn't do it. Just hand her the cheque as a present for the kid. Nothing more need be said. I'm going out for a run in the car with Flappy. So long!'

His father watched him as he loafed across the floor and through the French window. Then, with a shrug of the shoulders, he turned to the drawing-room.

'Well, Miss Couchman, my son and I have talked the matter over quite amicably, and we are both very sorry for this child. She seems to be unfortunate in her father as well as having met with this accident, and it is my son's wish, and mine also, that we should help her in the best way we can.' He produced a cheque-book from his pocket. 'Now, what shall we say?'

'Does your son admit the truth of the child's story?'

'Oh, no. Don't mistake our motive in making this little gift. We do it purely out of charity. In a place like this, a man in my position has certain responsibilities—call them privileges, if you like—and here is one of them. Shall we say—what?—a hundred pounds?'

Charity understood. If she accepted the money on behalf of Triss, there were to be no further inquiries. A hundred pounds was a large sum. Even to Charity it sounded large. To Triss and her father it would mean everything. Fred would be able to buy a little land and work it for himself. It would give him a fresh start in life.

She looked about her. How rich he must be, the owner of this splendid room, of this grand old castle, all those lovely gardens, and acres and acres

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of fields. It was said in Littleworth that he paid his *chef* a hundred a year, and had given sixteen hundred pounds for his new motor-brougham.

Mr. Ackrill was filling in the date.

'You won't object,' she said slowly, 'to our going on trying to find out who really did it?'

The little man looked at her sharply over his glasses.

'D'you think it's worth while?'

'Yes, if only for the sake of justice. The guilty person, whoever it is, ought to be punished.'

The draper laid down his pen. I shouldn't have thought,' he said, smiling, 'that you could be so revengeful, Miss Couchman.'

'It's not for myself. Besides, how is one to know that it won't happen again?'

'Scarcely likely, is it? The tramp, or whoever it was, must be feeling pretty frightened. I think you may take it for granted that he won't return to this neighbourhood.'

'Perhaps he never left it.'

Again he scanned her, but her face told him nothing. She was looking downwards, at her small, folded hands. Nothing was ever more placid than Charity at that moment. She held all the cards, and was not afraid to let him know it.

'That's equally unlikely. This is a nasty business, Miss Couchman, and one that we should all, I think, like to dismiss from our minds as quickly as possible. I advise you to leave the culprit to be dealt with by a Higher Tribunal.' He turned once more to his cheque-book. 'Let me see, it was one hundred and fifty we said, wasn't it?'

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'Triss and her father are very poor,' said Charity.

'Well, well, under the circumstances, I shall have no objections to making it two hundred. I should ike the gift to be anonymous. I'll make the cheque payable to your father, and leave him to act as trustee for the child.'

'Could one buy a little farm for two hundred pounds?' asked Charity meekly.

'A little farm?' Mr. Ackrill stared.

'I was thinking it would be so nice if Mr. Palins could start in some line for himself. It would give him an interest in life, and help to keep him off drinking.'

'I see, I see. I'm not a millionaire, you know, Miss Couchman.'

Charity said nothing. She neither moved nor looked.

'Still, it would be nice, as you say, if one could set the man up for life. Nice for him and nice for the girl. I'll speak to my agent. He may know of something going. In the meantime——'

He filled in the cheque, writing rapidly. Charity, before folding it, deliberately looked at the amount. It was for two hundred and fifty.

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CHAPTER XXVI

On leaving Charity, Fred Palins went to the residence of Constable King for the key of his cottage. He was in the act of entering his desolate home when Mrs. Bonehill hailed him from the roadway.

'Well, Fred,' she said, not unkindly.

''Ullo,' he replied, looking at her over his shoulder and throwing her a short nod. He went into the kitchen, leaving the door open behind him. Mrs. Bonehill followed as far as the step.

'This is a poor 'omecoming for yer.'

'If I don't grumble, nobody else ain't got a call to.'

The place was orderly enough. Charity had seen to that. There was a loaf on the table, with cheese, butter, and some cold boiled bacon.

'Miss Charity was 'ere first thing this morning and left them there things. Upon my word, she's a good little soul, if ever there was one.'

'She's all right,' growled the man.

He sat down at the table and began to eat. Ravenous after his long walk, he was too proud to show it, but ate slowly, looking at the floor rather than at Mrs. Bonehill.

'Can I do anything for yer? Shall I fetch yer a drop o' beer?'

'Ah.' He took two pennies out of his pocket and

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threw them down on the table as though the store was inexhaustible. Mrs. Bonehill lifted a jug from its hook and went across to the 'King's Arms.' Returning with the beer, she made so bold as to seat herself on the other side of the table. She had her theory to exploit.

'You 've bin up to the Vic'rige, they tell me.'

'Ah.'

'Did yer see pore little Triss?'

'Ah, I seen 'er.'

''Ow is she? Did she know yer?'

'She was sleepin'.'

'Oh, well, that's a good thing. It's always a good thing when they can sleep. I suppose,' she added, after a slight hesitation, 'Miss Charity didn't give no 'int as to 'oo done it?'

'She don't know 'oo done it.' Fred looked up from beneath his lowering brows, and fixed his eyes on the woman opposite. 'Do *you* know 'oo done it?'

'Me? Oh, no, I don't know. I daresay I may 'ave me suspicions, but that's not the same thing as knowing, is it?'

Fred laid down his knife and fork. His great body grew curiously still.

''Oo do you suspect, then?'

'Well,' replied Mrs. Bonehill, rather frightened by his tone, 'I don't know as I rightly ought to say. One oughtn't ter go gettin' folks inter trouble as may not 'ave—as mightn't 'ave——'

She faltered, finally stopping altogether. Fred waited until she had quite finished, and then, leaning across the table, repeated his question.

''Oo do you suspect?'

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'You won't say as I said anything?'

'That's all right. You just tell me. That's all as you've got ter do.'

Mrs. Bonehill looked about her stealthily. Nobody could possibly have overheard her, but she dropped her voice to add to the pleasure of making the communication.

'D'yer know the holler tree in the little wood?'

'Ah.'

'You go an' wait about there, keepin' yerself in the background, an' maybe you'll see summat.'

''Oo is it? I shan't give yer away.'

She rose, nodding mysteriously. 'Maybe you'll see summat,' she repeated. And with that Mrs. Bonehill left the cottage, well pleased with her reticence and discretion.

Very little later Fred slipped out by the back-door, and managed to gain the fields without attracting any attention to his movements. From that point it was easy to creep along, under cover of the hedges, to the little wood. It was not the first time that he had performed the feat, although it is true that the previous journeys had been accomplished by night. He was after bigger game this afternoon.

Within a few yards of the hollow oak he made a snug nest for himself among some thick brambles and leafy bushes. He could see all about him distinctly, but could not be seen unless by somebody actually searching the clump. He longed for a smoke, but that would not do. The lust for vengeance was ten times stronger than the lust for tobacco.

It was very, very quiet in the wood. An hour he

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waited, but no human thing appeared. Fred lay as still as a log. Not a twig cracked in the light summer wind but he raised his head, watching and listening intently. The second hour passed, and the third, and the fourth. Perhaps the woman had sent him on a fool's errand. No; she would never dare to play a game of that sort with Fred Palins. There were others in the village upon whom she might have played the trick, but never on Fred Palins.

The fifth hour passed. He heard the church clock toll seven. He was getting hungry again, and his limbs ached. But he thought of little Triss lying in bed with that hideous scar across her white cheek, and clenched his teeth. It was not until the clock had struck nine, and the wood was quite dark, that Fred relinquished his vigil.

He passed quite near the 'Arms,' so near that he could recognise the voices of his friends raised high, as usual, in some trivial dispute. The lights looked attractive, but he would not go in. He had given his promise to Charity, and he could not trust himself to keep it if he once found himself in the familiar tap-room, with numerous offers of half-pints to celebrate his return.

Somebody had been into the cottage and laid his supper. He finished the bread and most of the bacon, washing the meal down with cold water from the well. Then, after a lonely pipe, he threw himself down upon his bed and slept.

He called at the Vicarage next morning to get news of the patient. Charity was out. She had left in a hurry, and Mrs. Lilley did not even know which way she had gone. Triss was better, but

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she dared not let him see her without leave from Miss Charity. Any excitement might bring on another attack of the disillusions.

Fred had put some bread and cheese into his pocket, intending to pass the whole day, if necessary, in the wood. Whilst Charity was bearding the Ackrills in their mansion, therefore, he was again creeping, by stealthy stages, to his hiding-place.

All the long morning he watched, and listened, and waited. Nobody came near him. The wood was deserted.

Two-three-four. A footstep. He held his breath. The steps came nearer. . . . It was only a gamekeeper. He stopped within three yards of Fred to light his pipe. The scent of the burning tobacco was maddening. Then he went on and all was still again.

Five-six-seven-eight. The glade was filled with long shadows. Darker it grew and darker yet. When the church clock struck nine he would give it up for the day. To-morrow he would come again though, and the next day, and the day after——

'Ssh! What was that? More footsteps, but not the footsteps of a gamekeeper this time. Uncertain, shambling steps. Feet that faltered and stumbled, but always came nearer and nearer.

The excitement of the waiting, watching man was intense. Why should anybody, excepting a gamekeeper, be in the wood at this time of night? Cautiously he rose to his knees; then he drew his feet under him, crouching all the time. He was in a position to spring.

He could see the figure of a man—a tall man.

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Little Fred cared how big he was. The bigger the better. He yearned for a fight—for the fierce, sweet joy of smashing his fist into the skull of an enemy. His muscles were as hard as steel. His breath came in short puffs through widened nostrils.

And then he recognised the tall figure, that shambled as it came. It was Crazy Jim. Just Crazy Jim. All these hours he had waited for poor, harmless Crazy Jim! Mrs. Bonehill must be crazy herself if she thought——

Wait a minute. What was he doing? He had a stick in his hand, and looked as though he were about to strike with it. Yes; swish went the stick, swinging through the air. Then once again —*swish!* Crazy Jim chuckled softly to himself after the second cut. . . . Now he was bending down, peering at the ground.

Behind him, as lithely and noiselessly as a panther, Fred Palins was stealing from his ambush.

'Ha! ha!' chuckled the idiot. 'That copped 'er one! Copped 'er across the face it did!'

The next moment Fred was upon him, his hands at the boy's throat, his huge weight bearing him to the ground. Jim screamed with fear, but his throat was choked, and the cry too feeble to carry far.

Fred knelt across the prostrate body. Had there been drink inside him, he would undoubtedly have squeezed the life out of that miserable, overgrown lad. But he was cold sober, and Charity's appeal had been singing in his ears all day. 'Just consider for a moment what Triss's life would be

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when she grows up if you did as you say you will. Everybody would know her as the daughter of a murderer. Can't you see how that would blight her life? Can't you see that she would be ashamed to meet the eyes of her fellow-men?' And again—'I 'm not asking you to promise much, Fred—only to come to me before you do anything.' He had promised. He had not forgotten it. He must go to Miss Charity. And he must think of Triss's future. For himself, he cared not a rush what became of him, but Triss was another matter. She had her life before her.

If Crazy Jim had struggled, it might have gone hard with him, for all that. But he lay quite still, too terrified and too feeble to move hand or foot.

'So I've caught yer, 'ave I?' said Fred, speaking in a hoarse whisper lest the sound of his voice should travel through the still night air to the ears of a gamekeeper. 'Yo're the chap as struck my little gal across the face, are yer? The pore little thing that was as gentle as a lamb an' never 'urt a living soul! What d'yer do it for, eh?'

'I never!' gasped Jim. 'Yer killin' me! I never!'

'Oho! That's it, is it? You never done it! Think I didn't see yer swishin' with yer stick an' laughin' at the joke? Didn't I 'ear yer sayin' as it copped 'er across the face? Eh? What's the meanin' of it if you never done it, eh?'

'I never done it! I seen 'im do it! I never done it! Yer killin' me!'

'Seen 'im do it? Seen 'oo do it? None of yer lies, mind!'

'Let me go an' I'll tell yer. I seen it all, I did! Let me go an' I'll tell yer!'

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'You tell me now. Out with it or maybe you 'll never get another chance.'

'You won't tell 'im as I told yer?'

'We shall see about that. Go on! Out with it!'

''Twas Mr. Ackrill—the young 'un. I seen 'im do it with me own eyes. I was 'idin' in the bushes an' I seen 'im cop 'er one. That 's 'oo it was, but don't you tell 'im as I told yer or 'e 'll serve me the same way an' worse.'

'Yer lyin'! What shud 'e want ter strike 'er for?'

'Let me up an' I 'll tell yer. I can't tell yer when yer 'alf killin' me.'

Fred rose to his feet, dragging Jim up after him by the collar. Still retaining his hold, he began to lead the way out of the wood in the direction of the Vicarage. The hour was nothing to him in the face of this stupendous piece of news.

'Triss was in the oak,' babbled Jim, eager to relieve his mind of its burden, 'an' young Mister Ackrill and the lady what 's stayin' at the Vic'rige come to the wood ter court, and Triss seen 'em, an' they wanted 'er not to tell, an' she wouldn't promise, an' so 'e copped 'er one with 'is stick. An' then they went off an' lef' 'er there.'

''Ow did you come to be there?'

'I was 'idin', same as you was ternight. I used often to go there an' watch 'em.'

'An' you stood by an' let 'im do it, an' never told nobody arterwards, an' left the pore kid to lie there, p'r'aps all night?'

'I—I was afeared 'e might cop me one, or send me to Warwick, or something o' that. It don't do ter offend the gentlefolk.'

The gentlefolk! If this story were true, if Triss

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supported it when she came to herself, Fred would let people know what he thought of the gentlefolk. There must be some truth in the tale. Crazy Jim had not the brain to invent it. Besides, surely Triss would remember all about it when she was better?

Promise or no promise, the gentlefolk should not escape.

Charity was helping Mrs. Lilley to wash up the supper-things when Fred Palins and Crazy Jim arrived at the back-door of the Vicarage. At Fred's urgent request, she joined them in the yard, shutting the door of the kitchen after her.

'Go on,' Fred commanded. 'Tell Miss Charity what you just told me.'

Jim repeated the story; it was almost word for word the same. Fred was amazed at the coolness with which Charity received the news.

'Listen to me, Jim,' she said. 'You are not to tell anybody else, not even your mother, what you have told to Mr. Palins and myself. You are to put it right out of your mind, and forget it as quickly as possible. D'you understand?'

'Yes, Miss Charity.'

'What's this, then?' said Fred, angrily. 'Just because 'e's a gentleman, an' I'm only a poor man——'

'Wait, please! Come here, will you?'

She led him away a few paces. They stood in the light of the kitchen-window.

'If Triss tells the same tale,' stormed Fred, following, 'I'll make 'im pay for it, gentleman or no gentleman! I'll make 'im sorry for it to the day of 'is death, an' nobody shan't stop me!'

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Charity knew that he was sober. If she waited until the morning before telling him what she knew, he would go overnight to the inn, bursting with Jim's story, and, in all probability, get drunk. The consequences might be disastrous. Relying upon the success of her influence on previous occasions, she decided to deal with him at once.

'Fred,' she said, quietly, 'I have something to tell you, but I can't talk to you unless you keep control of your temper.'

'Is she worse? By gum, if she dies——'

'No, she's not worse. She's very much better. You ought to be very thankful.'

''As she told yer 'oo done it? I've a right to know. I'm her father. She belongs ter me.'

'Do please wait a moment, and speak quietly and calmly. You remember what I said to you yesterday about Triss's future, don't you?'

'Yes. An' I kep' me promise. I come to you. I might 'ave killed 'im else!'

'You see, you admit that you can't control yourself. All the more reason why you should let me help you. Now, what if this—this accident should turn out in the end to be a very great blessing both to Triss and yourself? Wouldn't that be better than plunging into fresh trouble?'

'I don't understand,' he muttered. 'I don't know what it all means.'

'Supposing that the person who was the cause of the accident was very, very sorry, and wanted to do everything in his power to make amends. Wouldn't that be better than——'

''Oo was it? 'Oo done it? I want 'is name! Was it Ackrill?'

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'I shan't tell you if you speak like that, Fred.'

With the cunning of low intelligence he saw that the only way to get the name out of her was to keep quiet. Never for one single instant, though, did he relinquish the idea that dominated every other thought—the lust for vengeance.

'Beg pardon, Miss Charity,' he said.

'Triss told me last night the name of the person who struck her. The blow was hastily struck, and the person in question is now very sorry. By way of amends, he wants to set you up in a little business of your own, so that you and Triss can make a fresh start and be very happy together.'

Then it *was* Ackrill! Nobody else could afford to do that! Steady, though! Be quite sure!

'What do you think of it, Fred? Wouldn't that be better than making a lot of trouble? Think of Triss. Your revenge won't help her, you know, and this money will. What d' you say?'

'It's—it's very kind, Miss Charity.' Craftily now!

Charity was delighted. She slipped her hand into the little reticule she always carried, and brought out the cheque.

'The sum of money that he wants you to accept, Fred, is quite a large one. You'll be able to start splendidly on it. Here—see for yourself.'

His fingers trembled as he took the cheque and held it up to the lighted window. But he did not glance at the amount. All he wanted was the signature.

'*Ah!*'

It was half-cry, half-snarl. The paper was torn into fifty pieces and ground beneath his heel.

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Then he faced Charity, his shoulders back, his eyes gleaming.

'That's all I wanted! Did yer think I'd take 'is dirty money? Did yer think I'd let 'im strike my gal, and then pay me to keep me mouth shut about it? You've come to the wrong man this time, an' so's 'e! I'll give 'im gentleman when I get me 'ands on 'im! I'll learn 'im to cut pore little kids' faces about with 'is cane! Afore 'e's a night older, 'e'll learn the kind o' man 'e's got ter deal with! Come on, you!' He seized Crazy Jim by the arm. 'You come along o' me an' tell the tale to the boys! We'll tell it to all the village, ah, an' all the county, come to that! Every one shall know afore this night's much older what sort o' man 'e is! I'll give 'im gentleman, the dirty cur!'

Charity's protests and entreaties had no more effect upon him now than the summer wind on the face of the mountains. Still gripping the terrified Jim by the arm, he ran down the drive and swung through the gate into the lane.

Alarmed by the noise of Fred's shouting, Mr. Couchman, Philippa, and Mrs. Lilley came hurrying through the kitchen into the yard.

'What is it? What's the matter? What's all the noise about?'

There stood Charity, her hands clasped, wondering what was best to be done. Her father must be kept out of it; he was too old for this sort of thing.

'It's nothing,' she said quickly. 'Only a drunken man. He's taken himself off now. Go back into the house, dear, and finish your game of draughts.'

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The Vicar, after one or two more questions, returned to the dining-room. Philippa followed him. Mrs. Lilley remained.

'I 'eard 'im through the winder, Miss Charity. I couldn't 'elp it.'

'Don't say anything to my father. He mustn't be mixed up in it. Keep an eye on Triss till I come back.'

'Yer never goin' after 'im all alone?'

'No. I'm going across to Nutlands.'

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CHAPTER XXVII

'DRUNKEN beast!' said Stuart, rather thickly.

Flappy opened one eye, looked at his patron, and shut it again. The elder Ackrill had gone into Birmingham immediately after the interview with Charity, and was staying the night there. Perhaps he was not yearning at the moment for his son's society. Flappy had taken full advantage of his absence.

Stuart went across to the window. He was bored to death. It was not much after ten, and there was nothing whatever to do in this dull hole of a place. To-morrow he would clear out of it. What an ass he had been to stay so long, just for the sake of hanging round a girl who had been fooling him all the time! Never mind; he had managed to get one back on her. He had written an anonymous letter to John Cogbill, giving the farmer a circumstantial account of Philippa's flirtations. That would spoil her chances.

There came a nervous tap at the door of the billiard-room, and the footman entered. The poor fellow was not looking so healthy and sure of himself as when he received Charity with such contumely that morning. His face was a sickly white, and his voice quavered a little as he spoke.

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'If you please, Mr. Stuart, you're wanted at the front door.'

'Wanted? At this time of night? Who by?'

'There's a whole lot of them, sir, nearly a hundred, I should think—common men, sir, with sticks! You can hear them if you listen!'

A murmur of hoarse, rough voices came from the other side of the house. Stuart began to look exactly like the footman.

'What's it mean? What do they want? Pull yourself together, man!'

'Please, sir, they said as you was to go out, and if you didn't they'd come in and fetch you.'

Flappy snored.

'Well, what did you do? You didn't leave the door open, you fool, did you?'

'They wouldn't let me shut it, sir. There was one man in front that seemed to be the leader—a powerful, thick-set man with a 'orrible face—and he put his foot in the door so that I shouldn't shut it. Perhaps if you was to go out, sir——'

'I *won't* go out! Why should I? Look here. Go and tell them that if they stay quietly where they are I'll be with them in a few minutes. Then go up by the back way into my room and get my revolver. You know where it is. In the meantime, tell Joseph to telephone down to the village for the police. D'you understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

Stuart waited, trembling. The reception of his message was distinctly hostile. The murmur of voices swelled; then suddenly died down altogether. The silence was worse in a way than the noise. He could not tell where they were.

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It seemed an eternity before the footman came back with the revolver. He brought the information that Joseph could get no answer on the telephone. It was the footman's opinion that the wire had been cut. The women-servants had locked themselves into one of the upstair-rooms, and two of them were in hysterics. Joseph had further ascertained that there were men guarding each exit.

Flappy still snored.

'Assemble all the men-servants just inside the door leading to the servants' hall. When you hear a shot from my revolver, dash out, slam the front-door, and bolt it. Go on! Look sharp!'

He gave the servants three minutes to get to their post. Then, with his hands in his pockets, he went into the hall. The revolver was in his right pocket, and his finger on the trigger.

The front-door was wide open, and the light fell on the crowd of angry faces. They numbered twenty or thirty at the most, but he could not tell that. He recognised the leader as the man who had refused to make way for his motor-car the previous morning.

''Ere 'e is! That's 'im! That's young Ackrill!' cried the men. Somebody called for three groans, but Fred Palins held up his hand and stopped them.

'Well,' said Stuart, halting in the middle of the hall, 'what d'you want?'

'We want you,' said Fred.

'What for?'

'We'll tell yer that when you come out.'

'You'll tell me now or not at all.'

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'If yer don't come out we shall come in. What's the good of frightening the women?'

Stuart thought quickly.

'Very good,' he said. 'Stand back ten yards and I'll come out on to the steps.'

Fred seemed to think this reasonable. They had all agreed to avoid, if possible, any damage to the house. Their quarrel was not with the elder Ackrill, but with the younger. He gave a signal, therefore, and the men fell back, he with them.

No sooner was the gravel sweep before the front door clear of his enemies than Stuart whipped the revolver from his pocket and fired over their heads. Startled by the whistling of the bullet, the men hesitated a moment. The next, as Fred Palins dashed forward, the great door swung to with a crash, and the bolts were shot into the sockets.

'He shall pay extra for that!' cried Fred, swinging round on his little band. 'Three of yer stay an' see as 'e don't get out this way! The rest follow me!'

Most of them had been born and bred in Littleworth or the neighbourhood, and knew the plan of the Castle. The conservatory was the weak spot. You could get from there into the billiard-room by merely forcing a light door.

Flappy, half-awake and half-asleep, his clothes soaked with the soda-water that Stuart had squirted over him, suddenly heard a terrific crash of glass. He sat up in his chair, stretching and yawning. A second crash. What did it mean? Was the house falling down? Dragging himself out of his chair, he staggered across the room and

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managed to open the door leading to the conservatory.

Fred Palins and two or three of the other men were in the conservatory by this time, and the rest were following, smashing as they came. Fred went straight for Flappy, and hit him a terrific blow with his fist on the point of the jaw. The drunken bully went down like a ninepin, and where he fell he lay.

'Come on, boys!'

They streamed down the passage that led from the billiard-room to the hall. Here the men-servants were waiting for them, the pallid footman well to the rear. Somebody struck at Fred with a hammer. He flung his great arms round the man's waist, lifted him clean off his feet, and flung him, with tremendous force, among his fellows. Then, leaving his band to tackle the rest, he ran up the broad stairway to look for Stuart.

It was dark on the landing. They had switched off the lights. Fred saw two corridors, running right and left. At the end of each was a window, so that, whichever he selected, his body would be a mark against the light.

Still, it was no use hesitating. If he drew Stuart's fire, he would know where to look for him, and he must take his chance of being hit. He plunged down the corridor to the left.

Not a sound. There was a door on his right. He tried it and found it locked. One healthy kick sent it flying in. He switched on the lights and searched the room. It was empty. There were three other rooms opening off that corridor, and all of them were empty.

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He returned to the landing. By this time, the servants in the hall had been overpowered, and those of Fred's followers who were not engaged in guarding them began to search the rooms on the ground floor. Fred did not stop them, but instinct told him that the man he was after would be found somewhere in the dark upper part of the house.

All the rooms opening off the right corridor, too, were empty. At the very end of the corridor, though, was a small door with massive lock and hinges. This puzzled Fred at first, until he remembered that it led to a turret. He had been up there once when he was quite a boy and the Castle was standing empty. He tried the door. It was bolted on the inside.

This required consideration. Stuart, without a doubt, had taken refuge in the turret. The door was very massive; kicks would be useless. He must employ strategy.

Fred ran back to the head of the stairs and called up two of the men. One of them was in the employ of a painter at Ullenhall, and knew every twist and turn of the building. From this man Fred learnt that there was another way out on to the roof—through a skylight on the top floor. He instructed the first man to batter at the door of the turret whilst he took the painter with him to point out the skylight.

The opening at the top of the turret-steps was very small. Stuart knew that nobody could get through it alive if he choose to fire. And he was so frightened by this time that he would have fired at sight. He knelt by the opening, listening

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to the hail of blows on the door below, and waiting until it should give way.

Fred Palins had taken off his boots, and came creeping through the chimney-stacks as quietly as a cat. Yes, there was Stuart! Steadily, now, and he would have him.

The grip that closed over Stuart's right wrist was so fierce that the revolver was shaken from his fingers and tumbled harmlessly down the little stairway. Fred's other hand was on the other wrist, and Fred's arms were crushing into the boy's ribs. Mad with fear, Stuart kicked, and bit, and struggled. Fred held him as easily, of course, as though he had been a baby.

The painter, who had followed Fred through the skylight, clambered down the turret-stairs and drew back the bolts. Then, for the sake of convenience, they tied Stuart's feet, and handed him gently down to the corridor at full length, Fred all the time gripping his wrists. From the corridor they descended to the hall, and it was in the hall, before his own servants, that they tried him.

A silent witness of the scene, and one unnoticed by Fred in his excitement, was John Cogbill. Charity had poured the main details of the story into his amazed ears, and sent him galloping off to the Castle to avert, if he could, a tragedy. The rioters had quieted down by the time he arrived. Indeed, he had much ado to find them. Now that he had found them, and noted the determined look on their faces, he was far too wise to attempt to take command. Besides, so long as their punishment was not outrageously severe, John's sympathies were quite with them.

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'Lads,' said Fred, 'this is the gentleman who struck my little gal across the face with 'is stick, and then left 'er to die, for all 'e cared. What d'yer say? What's 'e deserve?'

'Give 'im the same as 'e gave 'er!' shouted a voice, and the suggestion was received with great favour. In these few weeks, Stuart had succeeded in getting himself loathed in Littleworth and Ullenhall, so that the story of the outrage had fallen on particularly fruitful ground.

The scene that followed was very painful, more especially to the central figure. He screamed, and swore, and entreated, and threatened, and bribed; all to no purpose. They put him on Fred's back, tied a handkerchief about his mouth to stifle his screams and prevent him from biting, and each man in turn—avenged Triss.

Fred's own turn, though, was still to come.

'Open the door,' he commanded, and they flung it open wide. Out went Fred into the night, still bearing his burden. The other men, guessing what was in his mind, followed in high glee.

'The lake!' they told one another. ''E's goin' ter chuck 'im in the lake, blest if 'e ain't! Good on yer, Fred! Good lad!'

The lake was rather empty. The water had receded from the banks, leaving some three or four yards of thick, black mud. Into this Fred stalked without hesitation, pausing only at the very edge of the water.

'Take the 'andkercher off 'is mouth, somebody.'

They took it off, and then he lowered Stuart into the position of a dandled baby.

'Are yer sorry as you struck my little gal?' he

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asked softly, looking down into the evil young face.

'Yes, yes,' gasped Stuart. 'Let me go and I'll do anything for her. I shall be drowned if you throw me in there! I can't swim—really I can't! I'll give you anything to let me off — a thousand pounds! I swear I will!'

'I wouldn't let you off,' said Fred, sweetly, 'for ten thousand. You've marked my little gal for life, you dirty cur! I'll make you remember this night all *yore* life!'

He began to swing the body for the throw; Stuart's screams rang through the night air. John Cogbill stood on the bank, watching. He knew that the water could not be deep enough so near the bank to drown him.

'One! Two! Three!' counted Fred, and then he let go. Some say in the village that the throw was fifteen yards, but that, of course, is an exaggeration. They all agree, however, that the water was up to his waist when he struggled to his feet, and that his face was merely a lump of black mud.

As for Fred, he went home to his cottage, released Constable King—who was lying on the bed like a trussed fowl—and slept very prettily until the morning.

Tom King, oddly enough, quite forgot to arrest him.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

'I SUPPOSE you're right,' said John.

'Yes,' said Charity gently, 'I'm sure I am.'

'If, at any time——'

'Thank you, dear,' said Charity.

They were standing in the lane, midway between the gates of Nutlands Farm and the Vicarage. The night air was very still: it seemed laden with the richness of harvest. They could hear the clatter of Mrs. Lilley on the one side, and of old Mrs. Cogbill and Annie on the other.

The month was September, and Littleworth's thoughts were busy with the garnering of grain. There were strange faces to be seen in the village street, dark-skinned faces with long upper lips and mouths that dropped a little at the corners. In the taproom of the 'King's Arms' voices rose high o' nights, and the Irish brogue came rolling through the open windows and floated down the winding street.

In a week or two at the most the strangers would all have disappeared, and Charity, and Triss, and Miss Minto, with one or two others, would be decking the sloping windows of the old church with apples, and pears, and plums, and corn, and flowers. There would be heaps of carrots and turnips round the base of the font, which, it was generally conceded, needed hiding, and on the

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altar, Charity's especial care, would be the choicest of the flowers, and perhaps two huge bunches of grapes.

Littleworth, in fact, was pursuing the daily round with its usual serenity. You could still hear, of course, if you dropped into the 'Arms' of an evening, and did not look too much like Littleworth's idea of a London detective, snatchy accounts of the raiding of Ullenhall Castle, Stuart Ackrill's punishment, Fred Palins's mighty throw, and the various sequels. They would tell you how that Stuart had disappeared in his motor-car long before the village was stirring next morning, taking his friend Flappy with him, and that they were now understood to be touring about on the Continent. If you were a betting man, a dozen stout fellows could be found to give you twenty to one in shillings that Master Ackrill never showed his face in the district again.

They would tell you how that Mr. Ackrill the elder, summoned by telegram from Birmingham very early on the morning after the riot, had stormed, and raved, and sworn a mighty oath to clap half the rioters into prison and sweep his estate of the lot, but how that, after lengthy conferences with his solicitor, a short interview with John Cogbill, and an even shorter one with little Triss Palins, he abandoned the idea of vengeance and shut up the Castle for an indefinite period.

They would tell you how that, also on the morning after the riot, a message was received at the 'King's Arms' to send a trap to the Vicarage to drive one person and a good deal of luggage to the

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station, and how that Artie Yarwood, when he found that the passenger in question was Philippa Secretan, whose hand in the affair was now common knowledge, threw the reins on to the horse's back, jumped out of the gig, and flatly refused to sit beside such a cruel hussy for a single second. Whereupon little Miss Charity herself mounted the box, drove her cousin to the station, and would have kissed her on parting if Philippa had not snatched her cheek away and pulled up the window.

They would tell you, further, that the mark on Triss's cheek was rapidly fading, and that, in the opinion of the specialist from Birmingham, who had been sent down by the elder Mr. Ackrill at his own expense, there would be scarcely a trace left when the girl was of an age to be courted. And talking of Triss would remind them that Fred Palins, the hero of the hour, had been taken back into the service of Mr. John Cogbill, and, up to the present, had steadily adhered to the path of virtue in respect of his old enemy, alcoholic liquor.

The one thing that now troubled Littleworth was the indefinite postponement of the union of John Cogbill and Charity. They had been willing to allow them a slight interval to readjust their sentiments—say a month. But rather better than two months had flown; the little house over against Yew Barn was all in apple-pie order for the reception of the old folks; and still John annoyed the men by sitting in his own pew of a Sunday, and Charity annoyed the women by refusing to throw one single glance in his direction.

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The old clock struck nine.

'I'd no idea it was so late,' said Charity. 'Good-night.'

'Good-night,' said John.

They lingered a little. This night was a big one in their lives, and both felt that Charity's decision would be irrevocable when once they had parted.

'What?' asked Charity.

'I didn't say anything.'

'Oh!' She laughed—a funny, nervous little laugh. 'Good-night once more, then.'

'Good-night.'

The gate clicked behind her. She ran into the house.

'Is that you, dear?' called Mr. Couchman from the dining-room.

'Yes, daddy. I'll be down in a moment.'

He heard her go into her room and close the door. So did Mrs. Lilley. Mrs. Lilley was vastly experienced in reading the hearts of these two from the tones of their voices.

'"The best laid schemes of mice and men,"' she murmured to herself, '"gang aft amain."' And then, moved by the beauty of the sentiment, she left off wiping the dishes a moment in order to wipe her eyes.

As for John, the rejected, he sat him down in the porch, head in hands. Here he was found, not many minutes later, by old Mrs. Cogbill.

'Well,' she said, 'you look mopey, dearie.'

'Do I, mother? I was thinking a bit; that's all.'

She sat down beside him, and slipped her hand through his arm.

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'Why don't yer speak to her again, my lad? Take my word for it, she's forgiven and forgotten long ago.'

'I have, mother. I spoke to her to-night.'

'Well, well?'

'She was very gentle and kind about it—just like she would be. But she said there were some people who were meant for one another, and some who were not, and it was no use fighting against it, because it always led to unhappiness in the end. And so—that was all.'

'Oh, indeed!' cried Mrs. Cogbill. 'It was, was it? And you stood by, like the great big zany of a man that you are, and let a girl who's dying of love for you talk that rubbish until you'd both persuaded yerselves that you'd tumbled on something very clever and important! Upon my word, the foolishness of folks, even when they've got to an age when they should know better, makes me mad, that it do! Now you listen to me, my lad! If you let Charity go, you'll be missing the biggest prize that was ever dandled before your eyes, or's ever likely to be! What's it matter what she says? If you don't go straight across to 'er, and clip 'er in those big arms of yours, and give her a good kiss, and tell her that you mean to marry, whether she likes it or no, come Sunday three weeks, you're no son of mine and I'll never forgive yer! Be off, now! . . . And,' the old lady added, with sudden tenderness, 'God bless yer, laddie!'

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CHAPTER XXIX

Mrs. Lilley ran upstairs so fast that you would have thought a tiger was after her.

'Yes?' said Charity.

'I want to speak to you, miss, most particular.'

A little pause, and then Charity unlocked the door. She had blown out her candle, so that Mrs. Lilley could not see her face.

'Mr. John Cogbill's downstairs, Miss Charity. He told me to fetch you, an' 'e spoke so stern 'e nearly frightened me out o' me wits!'

'Oh, I can't go now! Tell him——'

'You *must*, Miss Charity. He said so.'

Charity went. It was dark in the hall. The Vicar had closed the door of the dining-room from the inside.

'Look here,' said John, catching hold of her as though he were going to give her a sound shaking, 'you 've simply got to.'

'H—have I?' said Charity, breathless.

They went out into the garden. The old clock struck ten.

THE END

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